Reaching for the Crescent

Aspirations of Singapore Islamic Studies Graduates and the Challenges

NORSHAHRIL SAAT
AZHAR IBRAHIM
NOOR AISHA ABDUL RAHMAN

ISEAS
YUSOF ISHAK
INSTITUTE

Reaching for the Crescent

The ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute (formerly Institute of Southeast Asian Studies) is an autonomous organization established in 1968. It is a regional centre dedicated to the study of socio-political, security, and economic trends and developments in Southeast Asia and its wider geostrategic and economic environment. The Institute's research programmes are grouped under Regional Economic Studies (RES), Regional Strategic and Political Studies (RSPS), and Regional Social and Cultural Studies (RSCS). The Institute is also home to the ASEAN Studies Centre (ASC), the Singapore APEC Study Centre, and the Temasek History Research Centre (THRC).

ISEAS Publishing, an established academic press, has issued more than 2,000 books and journals. It is the largest scholarly publisher of research about Southeast Asia from within the region. ISEAS Publishing works with many other academic and trade publishers and distributors to disseminate important research and analyses from and about Southeast Asia to the rest of the world.

Reaching for the Crescent

Aspirations of Singapore Islamic Studies Graduates and the Challenges

NORSHAHRIL SAAT
AZHAR IBRAHIM
NOOR AISHA ABDUL RAHMAN

ISEAS YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE

First published in Singapore in 2021 by
ISEAS Publishing
30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Singapore 119614

E-mail: publish@iseas.edu.sg
Website: <http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.

© 2021 ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore

The responsibility for facts and opinions in this publication rests exclusively with the authors and their interpretations do not necessarily reflect the views or the policy of the publisher or its supporters.

ISEAS Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Name(s): Norshahril Saat, author. | Azhar Ibrahim, author. | Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman, author.
Title: Reaching for the crescent : aspirations of Singapore Islamic studies graduates and the challenges / by Norshahril Saat, Azhar Ibrahim and Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman.
Description: Singapore : ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, 2021. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: ISBN 978-981-4951-37-1 (hard cover) | ISBN 978-981-4951-38-8 (pdf)
Subjects: LCSH: Islamic education—Singapore. | Islam—Study and teaching—Singapore.
Classification: LCC LC910 S6N86

Typeset by International Typesetters Pte Ltd
Printed in Singapore by Mainland Press Pte Ltd

CONTENTS

Preface		vi
Abbreviations and Acronyms		x
A Note on Translation, Spelling and Other Conventions		xv
1.	Introduction	1
2.	Overview of Islamic Studies and Mode of Thinking	20
3.	Singapore Islamic Studies Graduates: Learning Experience and Struggles	36
4.	Current Islamic Studies Undergraduates: Navigating Uncharted Pathways	81
5.	Challenges, Genesis and Prospects for Development	110
6.	Religious Education, Dominant Religious Orientations and Their Impact	151
7.	Conclusion	191
8.	Bibliography	207
Index		214
About the Authors		224

PREFACE

In the 1990s, Singapore government leaders raised questions as to whether Islamic education in the country adequately equips the Malay/Muslim community with necessary skills and knowledge to survive in the modern world. Students of religious sciences in full-time madrasahs were equated with school dropouts and deemed unprepared for the knowledge-based economy (KBE). Consequently, Malay/Muslim community leaders sought to readjust madrasah education to meet contemporary needs, and a number of the full-time religious schools underwent major revamp while the rest continue to be run the same way. Attention towards madrasah underperformance somewhat dissipated after the turn of the millennium: madrasahs promised to perform as well as national schools, agreed to work closely with the state's curriculum guidelines, and the government faced community pressure not to close them down, even though they had never threatened to do so.

Now, Malay/Muslim leaders are focusing on the downstream of Islamic education. Majority of the asatizah complete at least twelve years of education in one of the local madrasahs. The concern of the state is no longer about the students' achievements or the lack of them, but their attitudes, thought, and ideology. Already Islamic studies has been under global scrutiny, particularly after its graduates are found promoting radical, puritan, or conservative ideas to the masses. The state is also worried that the graduates are unable to contextualize religion based on Singapore values. However, in post-9/11, the state sees the

asatizah's worth in countering radicalism and terrorism through promoting "moderate" religious discourses, but all these would require efforts and resources to guide them. Without these guides, the asatizah will not be able to adjust and may end up displacing the local Malay identity with foreign ones depending on where they complete their religious education. We hear discussions about Malays turning to become "Arabized" as they inch closer to become more religious.

The subject of radicalism and terrorism has shaped much of the discourse on Islamic education that the bigger issues concerning Islamic studies graduates are overlooked. For instance, why do parents continue sending their children to madrasah, with the hope that they will become an asatizah and graduate with an Islamic studies degree? Every year, there will be excess demand for 400 primary one places for madrasah enrolment.

Since 2018, Malay political leaders have paid close attention to the asatizah community, with numerous schemes to understand their concerns, and meet their needs. This is a reversal of past nuances where their future would be better off in technical sectors. Towards the end of Yaacob Ibrahim's era as the Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs, he announced the building of an Islamic college to meet the needs of the asatizah community. While the factors that led to such programmes were never explained, one senses the doubt placed on returning students from overseas, particularly from the Middle East. Under the leadership of Masagos Zulkifli, more attention has been given to the asatizah. For example, he set up a committee to look into the future of asatizah (COFA), and started many initiatives to look into raising their pay and increase job opportunities for them. In June 2020, in line with his Hari Raya Aidilfitri message, he announced another new initiative called "Wakaf Singapura" to gather more resources from the community to meet the needs of asatizah.

This book examines the aspirations and challenges facing Islamic studies graduates after returning from their overseas studies. Moving away from the study of Islam and madrasah education from the standpoint of security, it seeks to understand how their

religious training shapes their religious milieu and how their ideas will impact society.

This book took three years in the making. It would not have been possible without the support from the Social Science Research Thematic Grant (SSRTG) of the Singapore Ministry of Education (MOE). We also wish to thank our research assistants Nur Diyana Zait and Fauzan Arif Roslee for all the assistance rendered. More than 400 Islamic studies graduates and current undergraduates have participated in this study. We wish to thank them for their patience and willingness to come forward to make this study possible. We are heartened that some came forward voluntarily to share their stories and perspectives with us.

We also like to thank the following institutions: Madrasah Aljunied Al-Islamiah, Madrasah Al-Maarif Al-Islamiah, Madrasah Al-Arabiah Al-Islamiah, Association of Singaporean Students in IIUM (ASIIUM), University of Malaya Singapore Student Council (UMSC), Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia – Singapura (USIM SG), The Singaporean Students Welfare Assembly in Cairo (Perkemas), Singapore Students' Association in Jordan (SIRAJ), Ittihad Mahasiswa Singapura Al Mamlakah Al Arabia As Saudia (IMAM SG), Andalus, Al-Zuhri, and Pergas (Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association). Assistance from the following individuals was also solicited throughout the research: Nur Laila Khalid, Diyana Hamzah, Yazid Mohamad Ali, Zalman Ahmad Ali, Muhammad Redhuan Goh, Syed Muhammad Aljunied, Nurshirah Tabrani, Siti Nur Khairiah, Nur Hikmah Md Ali, Amirul Zulhilmi Zulkifli, Bazilah Abu Baker, Syafiqah Md Taufek, Nadya Muhammad Haifan, and Muhammad Irfan Mohamad Noor. We also wish to thank Taufiq Majeed (Student Career and Welfare Office), Lukman Afandi and Mahmoud Mathlub (Asatizah Recognition Scheme) for assisting us in reaching out to the asatizah community.

We also like to thank ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute and the Department of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore (NUS) for making this collaboration possible. Special thanks go to Director & Chief Executive Officer, ISEAS, Mr Choi Shing Kwok; Senior Advisor Mr Tan Chin Tiong; Deputy Chief Executive Officer & Director, Research Division, Dr Terence Chong; Management Advisor Mr Koh Tin Fook; Director, Corporate Services Division, Mr Tan Tai Tiong; and former Head, Administration Mr Ang Swee Loh. Last but not least, we wish to thank the team at ISEAS Publishing Division Mr Ng Kok Kiong and Sheryl Sin Bing Peng for their assistance in this publication process.

Norshahril Saat
Azhar Ibrahim
Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

Ahmadiyah	An Islamic sect whose followers consider Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, a nineteenth-century religious leader, to be a messianic reformer of Islam.
Andalus	A part-time Islamic school in Singapore
API	Islamic Studies Academy (University of Malaya)
ARB	Asatizah Recognition Board
ARS	Asatizah Recognition Scheme
Asatizah	Religious teachers. Also used as a singular form.
Azhari	A scholar/graduate from Al-Azhar University
BA	Bachelor of Arts
Berita Harian	*Malay Daily*, a Malay-language newspaper in Singapore
CASIS	Centre for Advanced Studies on Islam, Science, and Civilisation
CE	Compulsory Education
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
COFA	Committee on Future Asatizah
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease

CPE	Continuous Professional Education
CPF	Central Provident Fund
Dars	A traditional study circle with a religious scholar discussing Islamic beliefs, ideas, and values
Edusave	An educational scheme in Singapore
Fatwa	A religious opinion issued by a qualified individual, such as a mufti, from the perspective of Islamic law
Fiqh	Islamic jurisprudence
Hadith	Tradition of the Prophet Muhammad's teachings, sayings, and actions
Haj	An annual Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca (Saudi Arabia)
Halaqah	A traditional gathering with a religious scholar discussing Islamic beliefs, ideas, and values
Hanafi	One of the four Sunni schools of thought under Islamic jurisprudence
Hanbali	One of the four Sunni schools of thought under Islamic jurisprudence
Hudud laws	Punishments under Islamic law according to the Quran
IAIN	Indonesian State Islamic Universities
IB	International Baccalaureate
Ibadi	A third branch of Islam, next to Sunni and Shi'ism. The rise of Ibadi Islam predates the divergence of Sunni and Shia Islam.
ICON	Islam in Context (a programme run by Muis for returning graduates)
IIIT	International Institute of Islamic Thought
IIUM	International Islamic University Malaysia
IMAM	Ittihad Mahasiswa Singapura Al Mamlakah Al Arabia As Saudia
Imamiyah	A Shia sect

ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
ISTAC	International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization
IUM	Islamic University of Madinah
Ja'fari	A Shia sect
JC	Junior College (Pre-university colleges in Singapore)
JI	Jemaah Islamiyah
JMS	Joint Madrasah System
KBE	Knowledge-Based Economy
KUIS	International Islamic College of Selangor
KUSZA	Sultan Zainal Abidin Islamic College. Currently known as UniSZA.
LBKM	Prophet Muhammad's Birthday Memorial Scholarship Fund Board
LGBT	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender
Madrasah	An Islamic school
Maliki	One of the four Sunni schools of thought under Islamic jurisprudence
Maulid	Celebration of Prophet Muhammad's birthday
Mazhab	Schools of thought under Islamic jurisprudence
MEC	The Majlis Pelajaran Melayu (Malay Education Council)
MHA	Ministry of Home Affairs
Mufti	A person of high Islamic authority conferred with the power to provide rulings (*fatwas*) on religious matters using Islamic law.
Muis	Islamic Religious Council of Singapore
MYF	Muslim Youth Forum
Naqli	Revealed
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NTU	Nanyang Technological University
NUS	National University of Singapore
PAP	People's Action Party
PAS	Islamic Party of Malaysia

PCICS	Postgraduate Certificate in Islam in Contemporary Societies
Pergas	Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association
Perkemas	The Singaporean Students Welfare Assembly in Cairo, Egypt
Pesantren	Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia
PH	Pakatan Harapan
PN	Perikatan Nasional
Pondok	Another word for Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia
PSLE	Primary School Leaving Examination
Ramadhan	A month in the Islamic calendar where abled Muslims are obligated to fast
RED	Religious Education Department
ROMM	Registry of Muslim Marriages
RRG	Religious Rehabilitation Group
SCWO	Student Career and Welfare Office
Shafie	One of the four Sunni schools of thought under Islamic jurisprudence
Sharia	Islamic law
Sharia Court	Islamic Court
Shia	A follower of Shiism. The word "Shiite" is also used to describe a follower of Shiism.
Shiism	The second largest denomination of Islam. In contrast to Sunni Muslims, the Shiahs consider Prophet Muhammad's cousin, Ali ibn Abi Talib, to be his successor.
SIRAJ	Singapore Students' Association in Jordan
SLO	Student Liaison Officer
SRDS	Student Resource and Development Secretariat
Sufi	Practitioner of Sufism
Sufism	Islamic mysticism
Sunnah	The teachings, sayings, and actions of Prophet Muhammad

Sunni	The largest denomination of Islam. In contrast to the Shiahs, Sunnis consider Prophet Muhammad's companion, Abu Bakr, to be his successor. The word "Sunni" is also used to describe a follower of Sunni Islam.
SUSS	Singapore University of Social Sciences
Tablighi Jamaat	A Muslim missionary movement which rectifies the way in which Islam is practised. The revivalist movement first originated in India in the 1920s.
UJ	University of Jordan
UKM	National University of Malaysia
Ulama	A religious scholar
UM	University of Malaya
Ummah	Brotherhood
UMNO	United Malays National Organisation
UNISSA	Sultan Sharif Ali Islamic University
UniSZA	Sultan Zainal Abidin University. Formerly known as KUSZA.
USIM	Islamic Science University of Malaysia
Ustaz	A male religious teacher
Ustazah	A female religious teacher
Usuluddin	Islamic theology
UTM	Technology University of Malaysia
Wahhabi-Salafi	A follower of Wahhabi-Salafism
Wahhabi-Salafism	A puritan orientation which holds that only Quranic interpretations, Prophetic narrations, and opinions from the first three generations after the Prophet's death are considered authentic.
WISE	World Islamic Sciences and Education University
YU	Yarmouk University
Zaidi	A Shiah sect
ZU	Zarqa University

A NOTE ON TRANSLATION, SPELLING AND OTHER CONVENTIONS

This book relies on primary materials based on the writings and interviews with Islamic religious elites. Most of these writings and interviews are in Malay and English. Articles written or responses spoken in the Malay language are translated into English by the authors.

The book carries the respondents' original quotes as close as possible, but the authors will exercise discretion to edit them for better flow without undermining the essence of the interviews.

Arabic terms are retained, but how the Malays use the terms in their everyday context are taken into consideration. For example, the term *ulama* in Arabic is the plural for *alim* (religious scholar). But for the Malays, the term *ulama* is also used as singular. Similarly, the term *asatizah* (Islamic religious teachers) can refer to both singular and plural, and we will not refer to the plural as *asatizahs*.

Non-English terms will be *italicized* when first introduced, but subsequent use of the terms will not be italicized.

Direct quotes will be in double inverted commas "...", and quotes within quotes will be in single inverted commas '...'. Quotes of more than three lines will be indented.

Malay and Indonesian names are identified by their first names. For example, Mahathir Mohamad will be cited as Mahathir and not Mohamad (father's name). English and Chinese names will be cited according to their surnames, so John Lee will be "Lee"

and David Foster will be "Foster". Arabic names will be treated in the same manner as English names, so Syed Hussein Alatas will be cited as "Alatas". Middle names such as "bin", "binte" "ibnu", "the son of" or "the daughter of" will be excluded, thus "Norshahril bin Saat" will be "Norshahril Saat".

Names will also exclude academic titles "Dr" and "Professor" and religious titles "Ustaz", "Haji", "Mufti", "Sahibus Samahah" or "Kyai Haji". So Dr Mohamad Fatris Bakaram will be addressed as Mohamad Fatris and Professor Quraish Shihab as Quraish Shihab.

All monetary figures will be converted to Singapore dollars (SGD).

1

INTRODUCTION

Singapore's religious studies graduates form a significant component of *asatizah,* a term which in the context of Singapore's contemporary Muslim community generally refers not only to those who teach religion (also known as *ustaz* for males or *ustazah* for females), but also those who have undergone a degree of formal training in religious schools. So broad is the usage of the term today that it also includes those with religious studies background but whose sources of livelihood are not necessarily in teaching religion but involve other professions which may or may not have anything to do with religious services or education. In the past, it was not uncommon for asatizah not to have acquired formal religious training to teach religion. Their socialization into religious education was informal based on devotion to the teachings of a spiritual master. The prominent ones amongst them are cherished and revered by the community. Others received religious education in one of the full-time madrasahs (Islamic schools) or part-time classes run by mosques or privately run religious schools, such as Bustanul Arifin (formed in 1946 but closed in the mid-1990s)

and Sekolah Ugama Radin Mas (*tahfiz* or Quranic memorization schools founded in 1956).

Given that the values of Islam touch the lives of Muslims on many fronts, asatizah generally exert strong influence in the religious life of the community and form the major social group that shapes religious thought, beliefs and orientations. As the ethical teachings of Islam underline all aspects of life, their influence is wide-ranging, covering areas beyond matters of worship and faith. Though the advancement of technology has facilitated the possibility of accessing religious instruction and teachings globally via new media platforms, this development has not displaced the significance of the local asatizah who continue to play an influential role in shaping religious thought and understanding through teaching and other religious services they conduct.

Some amongst them are considered as *ulama* based on their contributions to scholarship in matters pertaining to religion. A substantial number also continue to serve as religious functionaries in state religious institutions such as the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis), Sharia Court, Registry of Muslim Marriages (ROMM) and mosques, while others are involved in faith-based organizations (NGOs), such as Muhammadiyah, Perdaus, and Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association (Pergas), which provide religious and welfare services for the community as well as religious education in various fields and levels. While their traditional sources of livelihood in these areas persist, asatizah today are also venturing into niche religious businesses that include Islamic finance, halal tourism, Islamic fashion, halal food and beverage industry, "Islamic medicine", and many others.

Islamic Studies Graduates

Not all from the current pool of asatizah are graduates in Islamic studies. Some have obtained religious education from Islamic boarding schools, such as those in Indonesia, Malaysia, Yemen (Hadhramaut) or Syria. They are generally found among the ranks

of the senior asatizah who have had years of experience teaching religion and have gained prominence and strong reputation as being knowledgeable and moderate preachers. Generally, those not from the madrasah including public intellectuals who teach Islam from sociological and historical approaches are not considered asatizah, though their inclusion as religious scholars are not uncommon in societies such as in the United States, Egypt and Indonesia. Going forward, it is highly likely that the future asatizah community will comprise Islamic studies graduates when the current pool of non-graduates phases out. This means that only those with at least a Bachelor of Arts in Islamic studies will be part of the religious elite. This outcome is conditioned by the drive to formalize religious education up to the tertiary level and professionalize asatizah which implies that those who graduated with a diploma or from non-degree issuing traditional institutions may likely be gradually phased out in future.

While in the past those who succeeded in attaining higher religious education were negligible, a combination of socio-economic factors including the changing social structure of the community and the rise of religious revivalism has witnessed a substantial increase in religious studies graduates within the asatizah fraternity. Generally, the majority from this group received their formal education in the local madrasah. A typical asatizah would have undergone at least ten years of madrasah education at primary and secondary levels in any one of the six local full-time madrasahs before pursuing tertiary religious education. A fair proportion of them, however, emerged from part-time religious education conducted on weekends that have sprouted all over the country since the 1980s. In the current landscape of religious education, those who have not arisen from the madrasah may in time find it more challenging to be regarded as an asatizah. The recent advertisement for primary one madrasah registration with the phrase "*Menjana Asatizah masa Depan Melalui Pendidikan Madrasah*", which can be translated as creating the future asatizah through madrasah education, illustrates the point.[1]

The absence of an Islamic university in the country has traditionally propelled asatizah to pursue tertiary religious education in universities either in the region or in the Middle East. Many continue to flock to Al-Azhar University in Cairo which has traditionally been regarded as one of the most reputable institutions for Islamic studies. However, this trend is gradually shifting with the rise of other popular competing colleges in the Middle East including those in Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and to some extent Libya, Iran and Turkey. Regional universities particularly Malaysia's Islamic universities and to a smaller extent Brunei, are also no less gaining traction as witnessed by the proportion of local asatizah who have graduated from or are currently studying in these institutions. Their education in religious sciences include the study of theology, theosophy, Quran and *hadith* (narrations of the Prophet Muhammad) studies, sharia law and Islamic history. Apart from Islamic studies, some have also pursued other disciplines albeit from an "Islamic perspective" offered by some of these universities. The rise of a variety of twinning programmes forged by collaboration between local religious based organizations and overseas Islamic educational institutions in the region are also providing more options for asatizah pursuing tertiary religious studies education.

Dominant Discourse on Asatizah

While there has been consistent articulation by Singapore's political and community leaders that asatizah, given their training in religious studies have the potential of contributing, supporting and facilitating the community's adaptation to the demands of change and the modern world, there remains a lack of serious interest and discourse on the nature of religious education they receive locally and from abroad. Little is discussed on the extent to which the education they receive is able to develop critical awareness and relevant skills imperative in developing the ability to harness religious teachings to navigate and guide the community through rapid change and cushion its impact and challenges. While

admittedly advances in technology in our globalized world have come a long way in improving the quality of life in many areas and have facilitated greater interconnectedness, it has, however, also impacted on basic social institutions, values, norms and traditions and worldviews that had evolved from the past and heightened social and economic problems. As education, in its capacity to shape critical and moral thought and values, cannot afford to be aloof from such problems of society, even more so perhaps is the function of religious education. Yet though the need to examine the extent to which Islamic religious education has been effective in nurturing the development of moral and spiritual citizens anchored in their cultural tradition while able to adapt religious teachings to meet the demands of modern and pluralistic society and alleviate problems induced by change, these issues remain underdeveloped.

The lag in critical evaluation is amplified by the fact that robust and critical debates on the meaning of progress in education in our changing and complex interconnected world are being developed by educationalists and practitioners alike. Such education seeks to develop critical awareness of the limits of the traditional approach to knowledge premised on imparting ready information. It is underscored by a strong commitment to developing competencies imperative for analysing attitudes, values and beliefs that lie beneath the surface of texts which are never neutral or independent but project power relations. Understanding how knowledge change in varying contexts, how they are appropriated, by whom and for what ends are integral to education's ethical and social responsibility which is today strongly emphasized in critical literary debates (Luke 2003). Critiques on religious educational reforms by prominent Muslim scholars are also not isolated from this consciousness. They emphasize the need for religious education to develop awareness informed by integration of multidisciplinary perspectives and critical pedagogy in understanding, producing, assessing and accessing religious content (Noor Aisha 2018b; Azhar 2006). Though religious education cannot afford to be isolated from new modes of literacy, there remains a dearth of serious

and critical interest in the nature of dominant types of religious education that asatizah receive, nor has there been articulation for its review within the framework of such reforms. Yet the problem is all the more pertinent today given the vulnerable condition of the world and our interconnectedness.

Except for the brief period in the early 1980s with the formation of Mendaki when the need for institutional religious development for teaching and learning was raised and documented, nothing much has developed since then (Mansor 1982). In the 1990s in the context of the debate on compulsory education, the government did raise concerns on the extent to which madrasah education can prepare students effectively for the knowledge-based economy and the potential marginalization this may pose to madrasah graduates. However, the debate focused on teaching and learning of the national curriculum and did not spark interest in revaluation of religious education within the community. It is only after the attack of 9/11 that religious education of returning asatizah has come under consistent spotlight. Even so, this has largely taken the form of reiterations to the effect that asatizah must be wary of teachings that are not relevant to the conditions of Singapore's pluralistic society. They are constantly reminded and urged to contextualize religious teachings to suit the condition of Singapore's pluralistic society. While efforts are currently in progress in support of asatizah at the community level, the overriding attention is confined to employment issues they face upon their return and attempts at charting pathways for them to be interned, reskilled and retrained for professions which their religious education has not prepared them for. The recent formation of COFA (Committee on Future Asatizah) by the government in March 2019 illustrates the point. The Committee was formed to gather the Malay/Muslim community's inputs on the aspirations for asatizah, identify and provide recommendations on the major problems facing them and their alleviation.[2] In his Committee of Supply speech in parliament, Senior Minister of State for Defence and Foreign Affairs Dr Mohamad Maliki Osman reported that plans were underway for returning Islamic studies graduates to undergo on-the-job training and work-based projects through

a compulsory year-long certification programme, PCICS (Post-Graduate Certificate in Islam in Contemporary Societies), before they can be accredited and allowed to teach (Hariz 2020b, B4). COFA's recommendations that encapsulated the need to prepare asatizah as religious leaders, professionalize them and render them as exemplars for the community, had little consideration for examining the kinds of religious education received in relation to the needs and condition of society and their implications, apart from other problems relating to their learning and its implications on the community and the larger society.

Despite the lack of attention to these problems, official discourse persists in reiterating the significance of and need for asatizah in preparing the community to adapt to and cushion the adverse impact of technological advancement to ensure a more satisfactory life for the community and country. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's National Day Rally Speech in 2019, for instance, reflects the dominant tenor of commendations on asatizah for instilling "progressive Islam" crucial for Singapore's multi-racial society. He applauded the fraternity for contributing to promote the spirit of mutual respect, tolerance and inclusivity beneficial for the nation's cohesion and harmony. More recently, the Minister of Manpower Josephine Teo also asserted that "Asatizah serve as a bridge for the community to understand this world and prepare themselves for future challenges" (Siti Aisyah 2020, p. 1). In the same vein, Masagos Zulkifli, Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs, has also reiterated that "Asatizah constitutes one of the three significant pillars of the community (apart from professionals and entrepreneurs)" (*Berita Harian* 2020c). They are, he asserted, the bulwark especially in times of crisis not only in matters of religion, but also in the nation's well-being. Such discourse is consistently reported in the Malay press as the recent editorial in *Berita Harian*, the Malay daily, illustrates:

> Our asatizah are an asset of the community and country. Their influence is not only confined to mosques and madrasah. They play an important role in the wider context today as a beacon that illuminates darkness with their guidance for the community

> to think rationally and confront complex contemporary challenges. No matter how small their contributions are, even a drop of inspiration and encouragement they provide, goes a long way towards building an Islamic community and a successful and harmonious Singapore (*Berita Minggu* 2020, p. 14).

Context

While the asatizah's pertinent role in facilitating a more satisfactory condition of life for all is certainly undoubted, the constant national spotlight on them is closely intertwined with the rise of religious radicalism and terrorism amongst Muslims in the region, especially since the attack of 9/11. The spate of violence that erupted in the region in its aftermath including the foiled terrorist plot within the country masterminded by Singaporean Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) sympathizers in the name of Islam has conditioned the government's concerns with their implications on the social fabric of Singapore's pluralistic society. Recurrent cases of radicalized Muslims detained for extremist related activities and support rendered to such groups have not alleviated such fear.

In fact, since the country's independence in 1965, concerns have been articulated by the Singapore government over the extent to which the Malay/Muslim community is able to effectively integrate with the nation's development, values and institutions established to safeguard and promote multiculturalism and meritocracy. The community's strong historical, ancestral, ethnic, cultural and religious ties with the region have long been perceived as a factor that may condition conflict of loyalty to the nation in the event of a potential crisis with its predominantly Malay/Muslim neighbours. Furthermore, the pervasive understanding that Malay/Muslims are part of the transnational *ummah* (brotherhood) based on Islam that influences them to think, act or respond to issues in ways that differ from non-Muslims have reinforced the concern. The problem is exacerbated by the community's weaker socio-economic progress relative to the other communities (Lily Zubaidah

1998, pp. 188–89), mainly the Chinese and Indians, despite much improvements in recent decades.

The concern is further fuelled by the rise of religious revivalism in the Muslim world and the region since the 1970s (Muzaffar 1987; Zainah 1987; Azhar 2014). Discomfort and anxiety have been raised over evidence of strong streaks of utopian mentality (Shaharuddin 2005) and neo-fundamentalist (Roy 2004) thinking in religious discourse hitherto unknown. Underlying this is a consistent political motif that challenges or promotes ambivalence towards existing policies, norms and institutions. Persistent themes within this discourse reveal the centrality of the scare and rejection of secularism, the West as "decadent" and in "spiritual crisis", the fallacy of western-based social, political and economic institutions and the quest for an Islamic identity free of western influences. The fixation or yearning for an alternative pristine society or social order presumed to have existed in the early history of Islam is also integral to this phenomenon. Such rhetoric and debates are often couched with unquestioned and often repeated phrases such as "Islamic systems", "Islamic perspective" or "Islamic point of view" (Al-Attas 1993). The emergence of exclusive and authoritarian religious laws and thought by dominant groups in the region witnessed by attitudes towards pluralism and sectarianism has no doubt exacerbated official concerns.

Marked reversals in direction with the tide of revivalism in Singapore have further reinforced long standing perceptions of the community's religiosity and its implications on social cohesion. The growing demands by Muslim parents for their children to be enrolled into madrasah since the 1980s is a case in point. Unlike decades earlier, madrasah came to be seen as providing a safe haven for children and youths against the adverse influence of "secular" knowledge and education system and values. In fact, a segment of the Malay/Muslim community has been making requests to increase the enrolment of madrasah students which has been capped at 400 annually following the debate on compulsory education. For example, in September 2020, some netizens praised newly elected member of parliament Fahmi Aliman, who in his

maiden parliament speech, pledged to uplift the madrasah system (*Berita Mediacorp* 2020). In their Facebook postings, netizens urged the authorities to increase the current quota to 1,000 places. This trend contradicts earlier direction prior to the 1980s when the community moved away from vernacular and religious schools in preference for national schools. It prompted the government to express grave concerns given the performance indicators of madrasah at the national examinations and the impact this has had on its graduates to fit effectively into the demands of a knowledge-based economy. As former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in his National Day Rally speech in 1999 asserted, "There are now 4000 students in full-time madrasahs. Many of them dropped out annually. In fact, the majority of them did not get to tertiary levels. That's why I worry that these children may not be adequately prepared for the new economy" (Norshahril 2016, p. 72).

Such concerns posed by the looming threat of Islamist revivalism in the country were compounded by the issue of the *tudung* (headscarf) in a school controversy that erupted shortly after 9/11. It marked another stark episode perceived as demonstrating the uncompromising stance taken by some Muslims against the state to accommodate what they deem as an Islamic teaching which cannot be compromised even though it conflicted with long standing national policy on uniform in school which had not been an issue for Muslims all the while. The demand came under national spotlight again in 2014 when influential religious groups and individuals at the frontline advocated for Muslim women in frontline service sectors, such as nursing and law enforcement, to be allowed to don the headscarf while working. In addition, some Muslims have also urged the government to take a stronger stance against LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) and "liberal" Islam. They have taken their campaign to social media, through Facebook discussion groups such as "Suara Melayu Singapura" (The Voice of Malays), "Singapore Muslims for Independent Muis",[3] and "Singapore Muslims Against Liberal Islam". A host of other issues that have emerged within the community also reveal

intolerance among some groups towards Muslims with alternative viewpoints as well as non-Muslims alike. Coupled with arrests and detention of Muslim youths found to be attracted to or supporting transnational radical or violent ideologies legitimized on the basis of Islam such as the ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), these episodes have intensified anxieties and concerns of Singapore's leaders.

The sentiment has been further fuelled by episodes revealing the influence of foreign preachers on the community whose teachings were deemed to contain elements offensive to other religions and which transgressed laws devised to protect religious harmony. For example, in 2017, the state sanctioned Imam Nalla Mohamed Abdul Jameel for reciting a prayer during a sermon which condemned Jews and Christians. The prayer was not based on the Quran but supplication transmitted from the past. The imam, who originated from India, was swiftly and publicly reprimanded, fined, and sent back home after he apologized. The ban of two influential foreign Muslim preachers namely Zakir Naik, an Indian national, and Mufti Menk, from Africa, also induced by evidence of insensitivities in their religious thought towards other religions in the propagation of Islam further fuelled persistent concerns of the need for vigilance against religious extremist elements in the country. Though these incidents were not confined to the Muslim community per se, it did not dispel cause for concern.[4] That such episodes were dealt with decisively and swiftly demonstrated the government's non-tolerance for religious teachings that are deemed to impair and threaten harmonious inter-religious and inter-ethnic relations.

Given these developments, it is thus not unexpected that the asatizah have been increasingly seen as a pertinent source of support in facilitating the community's adaptation to the condition of Singapore and its overriding goals and values embedded in the national institutions. The formation of the Religious Rehabilitation Group established to counsel radicalized detainees under the Internal Security Act and the Singapore Muslim Identity Project spearheaded by Muis that culminated in the formalization of ten

attributes signifying the cherished values of Singapore's Muslim community are among some of the major initiatives undertaken by the asatizah fraternity in response to the call by the government to promote "moderate" Islam.

However, despite evidence of negative and backward traits of religious thought that impede the well-being of society and the strong potentials for religion to contribute towards their eradication, interest in the nature of the religious training and education received by asatizah and planning for its revaluation that will facilitate their preparedness in fulfilling the roles expected of them are not receiving as much critical attention as they deserve. There is also not much discourse on major factors conditioning the surge in religious education despite challenges that confront Islamic studies graduates during their educational journey and upon their return and the impact of their religious thought and orientations on the well-being of the community and larger society. The problem is compounded by the fact that critical scholarship on the nature of religious studies education especially at the tertiary level for asatizah, hardly exist.

Studies on Religious Education

While there have been some works on religious education emerging in the last two decades, these largely focus on madrasah education in Muslim majority states such as India, Indonesia, Malaysia as well as countries in the Middle East. Serious scholarship on Islamic religious education in Singapore tend to focus mainly on pre-tertiary madrasah education with attention devoted to issues on pedagogy, curriculum, history and state policy implications on madrasah education.[5] Furthermore, though studies on the religious life of the community are mushrooming particularly with the rise of religious revivalism, the impact of this phenomenon on higher religious education obtained by asatizah and vice versa has generally not been the subject of critical review. Substantive scholarship on the nature of Islamic studies institutions, their ramification in moulding the mode of

religious thought of graduates and its impact on the progress of the community and the larger pluralistic society remain wanting as do in-depth studies on the challenges and barriers confronting returning graduates especially in relation to employment prospects and religious development.

Objectives

This book seeks to address these lacunae. It examines the institutions of Islamic higher learning popular among Singapore's religious studies graduates in Southeast Asia and the Middle East and the dominant types of religious orientations that pervade in these institutions. The nature of prevalent religious discourse as a function of dominant religious orientations that prevail within the community propagated via traditional and new media platforms by the asatizah community are also analysed. The implications of such religious outlook on the extent to which the community is able to adapt to the demands and challenges of change will also be addressed. An examination of factors that condition the proliferation of Islamic studies graduates in Singapore, their aspirations and learning experiences abroad both formally and through informal circles, major challenges they encounter during the course of their studies abroad and upon their return including the extent to which they are able to fit into the ever competitive job market of religious sector, are also highlighted to provide a better understanding of the realties confronting the capacity of asatizah and their preparedness in fulfilling the expectations thrusted upon them. The extent to which the concerns of political and community leaders for asatizah reflect the actual thought of asatizah are also touched upon. Equally pertinent, the implications these have on prospects for progress of religious education that can effectively prepare the asatizah to help the community adapt to the demands of rapid change in the value sphere will be highlighted.[6] The book does not attempt to offer a blueprint or formulation for religious educational reform. However, it is hoped that the findings will contribute to providing a deeper understanding of the problems of

Islamic studies education and challenges confronting the asatizah in contributing to the development of the community, their own professional development and the larger society. It is also hoped that the findings will be relevant to policymakers intent on improving the state of Islamic studies education that can strengthen, enhance and promote a progressive religious outlook for the satisfactory condition of society.

Methods

Given the lack of systematic collated data on Islamic studies graduates and difficulties in accessing them, this study utilized primary data obtained from responses to survey questionnaires and focus group discussions involving both religious studies graduates and current undergraduates. In addition, in-depth interviews with religious studies graduates were also conducted. These were complemented by preliminary data obtained from Muis, Pergas and some madrasahs which provided an indication of the dominant universities which the asatizah have graduated from especially those registered under the Asatizah Recognition Scheme. The graduate respondents who participated in the surveys and interviews completed higher religious education mainly in the last two decades. The majority graduated from the more popular Islamic studies universities in Southeast Asia as well as in the Middle East. The inclusion of current undergraduates in this study was to facilitate a better understanding of the extent of continuities in dominant types of religious institutions attended, modes of teaching and learning, the nature of orientations prevalent in these institutions, challenges that confront them in the course of their education abroad as well as changes if any, over time, in all these areas. The focus on the graduates (and undergraduates) avoids entanglement with intra-group debate on who is an asatizah. More importantly, the graduates are the group that will likely form the dominant asatizah in future.

In total, 430 asatizah participated in the surveys, discussions, and interviews. The institutions from which they received religious

studies is a criterion apart from the year they obtained their education. Greater efforts were made to involve the post-1990s graduates because there were significant changes to the madrasah curriculum during this period, including the introduction of compulsory education and the Joint Madrasah System (JMS). Introduced in 2009, three of the six full-time madrasahs participated in this Muis aided scheme, in which Madrasah Al-Irsyad Al-Islamiah offers only primary school education, while Madrasah Aljunied Al-Islamiah and Madrasah Al-Arabiah Al-Islamiah, secondary and post-secondary education. The role assigned to the two secondary schools are also different: Madrasah Aljunied places more weightage on religious education while Madrasah Al-Arabiah focuses on academic subjects (STEM). The other three madrasahs—Madrasah Alsagoff Al-Arabiah, Madrasah Al-Maarif, and Madrasah Wak Tanjong Al-Islamiah—continue to offer primary, secondary, and post-secondary education.

The purpose of the surveys is to obtain relevant data on the socio-economic profile of graduates including their family's employment status and educational background; factors motivating their choice of religious studies education; basis of selection of institutions of learning and fields of study; their educational experiences abroad; the nature and extent of social/intellectual engagement; intellectual exposure and affiliation; extent of use of social media in developing knowledge on Islam; career aspirations; challenges faced upon returning; and sources of livelihood including barriers to employment. In total, 127 graduates responded to the surveys conducted between 2018 and March 2019. We also surveyed 108 undergraduates on similar issues: 59 per cent of those who responded to the surveys are female students, and 41 per cent males. Furthermore, 26 per cent are currently studying in Al-Azhar University, 27 per cent in Yarmouk University, and 20 per cent in IIUM. Of these, 29 per cent surveyed are majoring in sharia law, and 25 per cent theology.

Between August 2017 and June 2020, a series of focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with current undergraduates in Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Malaysia. The aim of the FGDs

was to probe more deeply into the survey findings and attempt to gather more data on issues which could not be easily obtained through the surveys. The total number of students interviewed in the FGDs is 140. Of these, 82 are female students. Twenty-eight of them are from Al-Azhar University, 43 from Jordan universities and 11 from IIUM. Data from the FGDs enabled us to compare the learning experience of students with their predecessors, apart from understanding similarities or differences in problems and challenges they encountered during their educational experience.[7]

We followed up the surveys with in-depth interviews with graduates from various Islamic universities. Altogether 49 individuals were interviewed largely through one-on-one sessions. Each interview lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours. The purpose of the in-depth interviews was to obtain more information and a deeper understanding of the lives of the asatizah with a focus on their educational history and factors that influenced it. The extent to which their educational experience has adequately prepared them with relevant skills and knowledge for work and roles in society was also the subject of focus. The advantage of conducting face-to-face interviews rather than FGDs for some is the relative ease in which the participants were able to speak their minds. Seventeen female graduates participated in the interviews. Fourteen of them are Al-Azhar graduates, seven from IIUM, eight from IUM, and the rest from various universities in the region and the Middle East.

Content analysis of religious discourse promoted by dominant asatizah within the community was also conducted. This includes examining their teaching and writings in social media, book publications, sermons, pamphlets, newspaper columns, newsletters, journals and also advertisements in newspapers (for those engaging in business). We also examined closely blogs and Facebook postings in order to understand their mode of thought. Podcasts also attracted our attention as it is now the trend for the graduates to express their views. For those making their livelihood in religious business, newspapers and broadcast media are main channels through which they advertise their religious

services. Examining these sources of information provides insights into the asatizah's dominant orientations and their implications on society. While the impact of education is not the only factor in shaping their religious outlook, this chapter contends that it cannot be overlooked.

Book's Outline

Data from this research are presented in the following manner. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the landscape of Islamic education and compares the traditional, modern, and emerging modes of religious transmission evident in major Islamic institutions today. While in the past, Singaporeans attended boarding schools in neighbouring Malaysia and Indonesia for their religious training, this is no longer the case today. Since the 1960s, Singapore students consider the Al-Azhar University in Cairo to be the Harvard/Oxford of Islamic studies. The situation is also changing now with more graduates enrolling into universities in Malaysia and Saudi Arabia. The latest trend is to enrol into universities in Jordan instead of Al-Azhar. This chapter highlights the different modes of religious orientation that pervade in religious institutions of learning and their ramifications on the nature of religious education that thrive in the Muslim world. It captures competing modes of religious orientations namely traditionalism; revivalism/resurgence and the rise of Islamization of knowledge paradigm; Salafi-Wahhabi orientation and the reformist outlook. Differentiating these modes of thinking at this stage sets the context for understanding the dominant type of religious education impacting local Islamic studies graduates and its ramifications in shaping their perspectives as well as the well-being of the community amid the demands of rapid change.

Chapter 3 presents and discusses the data gathered from the surveys, FGDs, and face-to-face in depth interviews with the graduates. The chapter highlights the graduates' learning journeys, their experiences studying at local madrasah, their struggles while studying overseas, and their challenges searching for jobs

upon they returned. The chapter compares where possible, the experiences of students from the various universities in the Middle East (such as Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia), and those who had studied in the region (such as Malaysia and Indonesia).

Chapter 4 applies a similar framework to the previous chapter, but focuses on the current undergraduates. This allows one to compare the trajectory of current students, their aspirations and motivations for pursuing Islamic studies, the modes of teaching and learning, the extent and nature of interaction with overseas students, types of support they receive from relevant stakeholders and their intellectual affiliation. Their main concerns upon returning are also explored.

Drawing on data discussed in the previous two chapters, Chapter 5 focuses on challenges and problems faced by the graduates upon their return from overseas. It also discusses the genesis of the conditions that contributed to the current challenges in meeting their expected roles in society, as well as major policies and programmes undertaken by community leaders to resolve their concerns. The chapter also touches on the relevance and effectiveness of current initiatives and policies devised by community stakeholders at addressing these problems.

Chapter 6 analyses dominant religious discourse promoted by the asatizah. It maintains that the asatizah's sense of issues are functions of their religious orientations which reveal swings between traditionalism and revivalism. Their thought and responses to a range of issues such as governance, laws, gender relations and knowledge are analysed to demonstrate the dominance of these religious orientations. While religious education may not be the only factor shaping the asatizah's religious outlook, this chapter contends that it cannot be ignored or overlooked in understanding the asatizah's mode of religious thought. Its overriding aim is to examine the impact of the asatizah's dominant modes of religious thought in preparing the community for the challenges of change and modernization. Finally, Chapter 7 concludes by reflecting on the future of the asatizah and Islamic studies graduates. It also provides some recommendations.

NOTES

1. The advertisement calls for applications to Madrasah Irsyad Zuhri Al-Islamiah, Madrasah Alsagoff Al-Arabiah, Madrasah Al-Maarif Al-Islamiah, and Madrasah Wak Tanjong Al-Islamiah. See, for example, the advertisement in *Berita Harian*, 18 March 2020, for those born between January 2014 and January 2015.
2. See Muis website, "Committee on Future Asatizah", https://www.muis.gov.sg/Our-Services/COFA (accessed 24 February 2020).
3. Muis stands for Islamic Religious Council of Singapore, a statutory board formed in accordance with the Administration of Muslim Law Act (1965). The institution oversees the Malay/Muslim community.
4. In another incident, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) investigated claims about an American Christian preacher Lou Engle who preached intolerant views about Muslims. The speaker was invited to speak in Singapore in 2018; later, he was subsequently banned. In 2019, the authorities rapped a social media personality and her brother for producing a video that insulted the Chinese. Later, in a separate incident, a Chinese actor invited controversy for "brown facing" himself in an advertisement when portraying an Indian character.
5. Read for examples the writings of Intan Azura (2010); Sa'eda (2009); Tan (2009); and Noor Aisha and Lai (2006).
6. Some chose to study in Indonesian universities and Islamic boarding schools, but the numbers are likely to be small. This study should be able to ascertain the exact figures.
7. By now, some of the undergraduates we spoke to have already graduated and returned to Singapore.

2

OVERVIEW OF ISLAMIC STUDIES AND MODES OF THINKING

Generally, we can distinguish two types of Islamic studies as an academic discipline. One is the confessional-type of Islamic studies offered in various universities in the Muslim world; the second, the Islamic studies programmes offered in several universities in the West. The latter continues the colonial-orientalist tradition and its long history of Islamology. While there is a growing body of works that appraises the latter, critical evaluation of the former, specifically Islamic studies found in Muslim countries hardly exist, if at all. For the majority of Muslim students pursing basic degree in Islamic studies, the confessional approach is popular, and only a handful enrol into higher degree programmes in western institutions.[1]

The nature, type and efficacy of Islamic studies are tied to various factors. Islamic studies programmes found in various institutions of higher learning have evolved differently in Muslim countries, and they are tied to the respective national education policies and dominant religious outlook of the country. Islamic

studies programmes in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, for instance, invariably have strong Salafi-Wahhabi imprint, unlike the Indonesian State Islamic Universities (UIN) in Jakarta, Jogjakarta and Surabaya. In these premier Indonesian state-funded Islamic universities, eclectic approaches to the study of Islam are evident, with social sciences and philosophy integrally incorporated and infused into the Islamic studies corpus. However, most Islamic studies programmes in Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent are modelled after the Al-Azhar University's Islamic studies (in Cairo), deemed to be the paradigm for Sunni religious learning and scholarship.

Besides being taught in Islamic universities, Islamic studies are also offered in departments, faculties, or academies in many "secular" universities around the world, both in Muslim majority countries as well as in Muslim minority ones. The rise of public universities throughout the Muslim world has witnessed the emergence of various Islamic studies programme, apart from the full-fledged Islamic universities. The rise of modern universities in Malaysia, Jordan, Libya, Turkey, Indonesia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, has seen an expansion of Islamic studies, gradually incorporating various modern subjects within its purview, inasmuch as it retains traditional learning corpus. For example, the international Islamic universities in Pakistan and Malaysia are known for their Islamization of knowledge flagship, perceived to be an Islamic intellectual approach aligned to the Saudi-sponsored International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) based in Virginia, USA. In Turkey and Indonesia, the state took proactive actions to establish modern Islamic studies from the lower to the tertiary levels that are both intellectually eclectic and nationalistic in outlook.

While these universities are "modern" in terms of infrastructural contemporaneity and system of management, their respective Islamic studies programmes are not necessarily modern in outlook, reformistic, liberal or cosmopolitan. Quite the reverse, these Islamic studies departments or institutions are known for their conservative orientation, and their approach to teaching and learning are invariably confessional and traditionalistic. Hence,

not all Islamic studies schools can offer the same breadth and depth because of their diverse ideological orientations. To put in another way, the Islamic studies programmes offered in these countries are mere extension of traditional Islamic learning, even though they are packaged in an up to date curriculum format by introducing the modular system and classroom assessment methods. A more eclectic approach within such institutions would depend on the calibre and ideological affiliation of lecturers as well as the extent of institutional support they receive.

The Dominant Confessional Type

Islamic studies found in many Muslim countries are generally of the confessional type, which means that the standpoint of the believers is taken to be the basis of devising the entire curriculum and content. Here, it is the Muslim community or congregation that the entire teaching and programmes target. Within these, mainstream matters relating to faith, rituals and worship are duly taught and emphasized. Learning leans heavily towards prescribed texts that have remained unchanged or unreviewed, while memorizing becomes the central pedagogical style, alongside a strong normative system of belief, consistent with any kind of devotional studies. Simply put, the confessional nature of Islamic studies forms the basis for the training of religious teachers and functionaries in Muslim societies and organizations. Piety and devotion are the expected outcomes for students trained in this manner, and they are prepared to serve in the religious domain. Thus, one cannot expect academic rigour that emphasizes critical thinking or any exposure to conducting research in this type of religious studies programme. Indeed, the research and writing component hardly exist within such colleges, especially those specializing in traditional religious sciences.

Traditionally, Singapore students have been attracted to Islamic studies offered in Egypt, though Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Malaysia have also been popular destinations. The branches of knowledge within Islamic studies which they generally learn include theology (*usuluddin*), sharia or jurisprudence (*fiqh*), exegesis

of the Quran (*tafsir*), and Arabic language. New subjects like missiology (*dakwah*) and Islamic economics are also attractive choices for many of them. However, subjects such as philosophy and literature, and the other branches of humanities, attract little interest. Evidently, these subjects are also not integral to these universities' curriculum and programmes. By and large, social science disciplines like sociology is remote and deemed to be part of "western" or "secular" knowledge incompatible with Islamic beliefs.

The Islamic Studies Option

In the past, only a few privileged families from the Malay world could afford to send their children to Al-Azhar University in Cairo, the oldest university in the world, or other universities in Saudi Arabia. At the turn of the twentieth century, well-known religious figures in the region were trained in either Mecca (known as Hijaz then, today, Saudi Arabia) or Al-Azhar University in Cairo, and a small number who studied in India. Historically, for Muslim students in Southeast Asia, pursuing their studies in the Islamic heartland, namely Mecca and Cairo, have always been in their dream. Returning from these centres of learning rendered one highly respected and invariably accorded with significant and reputable positions within the religious elite and establishment circles. The situation today has changed slightly. To pursue Islamic studies overseas is a realizable dream for many students, not excluding those from madrasah. Yet, Cairo and Saudi Arabia remain ideal destinations. In some countries, governments take a leading role in sending students abroad, consistent with their desire to train a group of capable and knowledgeable class of religious functionaries and scholars. Some build Islamic colleges or Islamic studies departments within the universities' faculties. Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei are cases in point.

The expansion of educational opportunities and greater affordability in post-independent Singapore has seen a manifold increase in the number of students pursuing Islamic studies abroad over the years. Graduating cohorts from one of the six local

madrasahs may continue their studies in local polytechnics and universities to better prepare them for the job market. However, many choose to enrol in Islamic universities so that they could be effective, authentic religious scholars. The perception that a linear training in Islamic studies is necessary to be an *ulama* and that this requires developing a strong command of Arabic and exposure to an Islamic milieu deemed crucial elements for the training of religious teachers and scholars, continues till today. As such, studying in the Middle East has been the premier choice for many who seek to pursue this option.

In the case of Singapore, students' decision to study abroad depends on the personal motivation of each student, alongside consideration of available funding and peer examples and advice provided by seniors and mentors. Generally their motivations for pursuing Islamic studies abroad can be attributed to both endogenous and exogenous factors. This will be discussed further in chapters 3 and 4. Locally, there is no institution that offers Islamic studies at the tertiary level, though plans for the Singapore Islamic College are on the way. Madrasah students who enrol into local universities do not pursue religious studies, but the sciences and engineering. As entry into these local universities are highly competitive, the majority tend to pursue religious studies in overseas institutions. Neighbouring Malaysia is an option, but it is less attractive or prestigious since Malaysian Islamic studies students themselves pursue their Islamic studies degrees overseas, especially in the Middle East. Indonesian Islamic universities do not entice much interest among Singapore madrasah graduates either because of lack of information about what they can offer, or prejudicial views which associate them with "liberal" or "deviant" orientation. While Al-Azhar University has traditionally been their premier choice for decades, the shift in interest to enrol into the Islamic studies in countries like Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states suggests a change in Singapore Muslim society's orientation about religion, notwithstanding that these countries—especially Saudi Arabia and Gulf states—also offer lucrative scholarships and funding.

Mode of Thinking and its Impact on Islamic Studies

In order to understand and assess the nature of Islamic studies offered in various universities throughout the Muslim world, one must examine prevailing religious orientations that pervade in their respective institutions and societies. There is no monolithic Islamic studies paradigm that exists across the Muslim world, each is shaped by local, historical and national dynamics. By that extension, students trained in a particular type of Islamic studies in a specific institution or country can potentially be influenced by the dominant religious orientation that prevail there. This in turn has direct consequences on their style of thinking on religion. Religious education is very much conditioned and impacted by the prevailing mode of thinking within religious circles. Nevertheless, one cannot assume that all Islamic studies graduates trained aboard can easily integrate and function effectively in their community of origin.

As mentioned, Islamic studies of the confessional type is most commonly accepted as the only legitimate educational norm for the training of Islamic studies students. The expectation to conform to doctrinal precepts and follow a certain school of thought within the Islamic tradition is deemed necessary. The graduates themselves are automatically categorized as *asatizah* (religious teacher, that is by design or by choice), while the ablest among them are regarded as ulama. In all, they are considered as the guardians of religion and command great respect from the community. But the types of asatizah that function in the community cannot be said to be monolithic in orientation and style of thinking. Their previous training inasmuch as the prevailing local conditions inform their affiliations. It is in this context that we need to look at the types of Islamic studies training that they have been subjected to. Based on our literature survey of the varieties of Islamic studies found in various Muslim countries, alongside a general observation of the typologies of the local asatizah and the mode of thinking which they are affiliated to, we delineate the following types of Islamic studies and its attendant orientations:

(a) Dominance of Religious Traditionalism

The Al-Azhar University is generally regarded as the premier centre of Islamic learning in the Sunni world. Since the late nineteenth century, prominent Sunni figures have been affiliated with Al-Azhar, although for centuries Mecca has been the centre of Islamic learning for Southeast Asian Muslims. Before the growth of other Islamic universities and departments in the Muslim world today, Al-Azhar held this premier position, especially when it was helmed by Islamic reformers such as Shaikh Muhammad Abduh (b.1849–d.1905).

Apart from Muhammad Abduh, the university is also known to be led by reputable, moderate and progressive *sheiks* such as Mustafa al Maraghi (b.1881–d.1945) and Mahmud Shaltut (b.1893–d.1963). Thus, Al-Azhar University graduates in British Malaya/Singapore were among the reformist figures in the region during the pre-war era. The short-lived reformist Madrasah Iqbal—set up in 1907 in Singapore—was inspired by the Al-Azhar model (Khadijah and Nor Adina 2005). But the discourse churned out from Cairo has never been consistently reformist, and straddles between traditionalism and reformism. Between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, sheikhs from both camps compete with one another for control of the discourse. One prominent traditionalist sheikh critical of the reformist camp was none other than Muhammad 'Illish (b.1802–d.1882), the Mufti of Egypt from 1854 to 1882, from the Maliki school of thought (Gesink 2009, p. 89).

Nevertheless, so significant is the impact of Al-Azhar in the Sunni world that its curriculum model has become the standard for madrasah, and many young students dream of pursuing their studies of inter-religious sciences there. Not surprisingly, the majority of the asatizah and ulama were graduates of this university in the post-war period. But the reformist posture of Al-Azhar was short-lived. Abduh's reformist zeal has given way to the more traditionalistic orientation, characterized by the following: (a) orthodoxy in substance and spirit, with (b) textual tradition given priorities over the rest, such that (c) the

naqliah tradition (scriptural sources) takes precedence over the *aqliah* tradition (rationalist sources); strong emphasis on *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and *usuluddin* (doctrinal theology) as compared to *falsafah* (philosophy) or even *kalam* (speculative theology). Mastering Arabic is emphasized together with memorization of the traditional sources. The veneration of scriptural tradition is the hallmark of this affiliation, which primarily explains why religious traditionalism befits the category to characterize this group. By and large, the traditional sources could be traced as far back to the classical learning in medieval Islam, with enormous intellectual energy spent on mastering texts over contextual interpretations. Learning ethos is invariably linked to pious orthopraxy.

Azharites (which refers to Al-Azhar University graduates) have fairly good exposure to the classical textual tradition but the same intensity cannot be said about contemporary Islamic discourse. Hence, upon returning to their respective homeland, Azharites often join traditional centres of Islamic learning, as well as the religious bureaucracy and establishment. Apart from Al-Azhar, there are many Islamic studies colleges that exist today in the Muslim world, primarily modelling their curriculum based on this premier institution. Closer home, the Malaysian Islamic studies programmes offered in local universities and colleges have a strong Al-Azhar University affiliation (Ibrahim 1998), because Al-Azhar is the alma mater of many of its teaching staff.

The traditionalist mode of thinking, while emphasizing selected cannons of the past, is also characterized by aversion to reformistic ideas. One clear feature in traditionalist discourse is the relegation of reformist ideas and its icons. The aversion to incorporate ideas outside the fold of traditionalist thinking could well take place side by side with the propensity to embrace and adopt products of modern technology. This is why we can see today that many Islamic studies colleges are very well structured in conventional curriculum and adopts the modular system like the rest of the world, yet its contents, pedagogy and spirit do not go beyond traditionalism.

Apart from this, there is also a misleading assumption that education and discoursing in English is naturally "open", "advanced" or even "critical". With many colleges using English as the medium of instruction for the pragmatic reason of attracting more international students, this chain of thinking also applies to Islamic studies. In other words, the latter, housed within a university setting, and equipped with the latest educational aids and assessment techniques, is deemed to be progressive and modern, but this is often not the case. It is imperative to critically assess the substance of the discourse and curriculum of the Islamic studies programmes offered beyond simply examining physical infrastructures (such as campus size, application of technology in lecture theatres, the use of IT) and teaching packages to ensure deeper insights into the predominant orientations and teaching culture which bear direct implications on the students' intellectual development.

(b) Religious Resurgence and the Islamization of Knowledge

Since the late 1970s, Muslim societies around the world witnessed the emergence of religious resurgence, and Singapore Muslims are not excluded from its impact. Within the community, particularly among the educated and middle class Malays, the revivalist mode of thinking was popular. The revivalist orientation can be characterized by: (a) giving primacy to a selective strand of Islamic thought and practices in every aspect of Muslim life, covering the realms of culture, development, education, politics and the like; is (b) pronouncedly anti-western and anti-secular in its rhetoric since its (c) agenda is to re-Islamize Islamic communities and nations. Stemming from this motif and central to its projection is the (d) Islamization of knowledge and by extension, the Islamization of culture, education, development and economics. It is important to note that the revivalists, in their insistence of an "Islamic alternative", give less premium to traditionalist textual learning for their religious mantra has always been to return to "authentic" Islamic sources, namely Al-Quran and hadith which they select and interpret as pristine and the panacea for all modern day predicaments.

The international Islamic universities established in Pakistan (in 1980) and Malaysia (in 1983) are examples where resurgent Islamization of knowledge agenda has shaped their curriculum. But this does not mean that revivalist mode of thinking is non-existent beyond these two campuses. Today, the revivalist discourse has also entered the mainstream. In fact, revivalist ideas are more common today compared to when it first started and have become even more obvious when groups insist that an "Islamic comprehensive system" can be the alternative to the present order deemed to be the creation of liberal, secular and atheistic West. They even dismissed the reformist agenda of the late nineteenth-century reformers, and its neo-reformist variants and consider them to be tainted for accommodating western ideas. Their zealous appeal for an Islamic system to replace the present order demonstrates an exclusivist outlook, although they have no qualms in embracing the technological products of the West. Similarly, while they are at ease with utilizing modern parlance to articulate their agenda, their conservative stance on pluralism, gender equality, human rights, and critical approaches in reading religious texts are highly evident.

Even when revivalists take up issues raised by the reformers, such as gender equality, human rights, and democracy, their framing and conceptualization insist on the need for an Islamic way or the creation of an Islamic system. Invariably "Islamic perspectives" are made appendage to any deliberation on sciences, law, culture and the arts. Hence, it is not uncommon to come across publications and forums with themes on "Islamic economics", "Islamic development", and "Islamic sciences". All these demonstrate intellectual proclivities of their proponents, such that the fervour for Islamization becomes rhetorical slogans rather than concrete, serious works that deal with knowledge and technology.

Within this spectrum of revivalist mode of thinking, it is worthy to note its affiliation to political Islam headed by the desire to extend the implementation of sharia to all aspects of Muslim social and religious life, in a way that fundamentally departs from the traditionalist Azharites who shun away from power, politics or

activism in the social arena. Moreover, the apologetic tendency of revivalist Islam has "destroyed the tradition of critical and introspective thinking".[2] The resurgence circles and their active network of Muslims all over the world constantly demonstrate their call for the unity of the Muslim *ummah* to counter what they perceive as western influences, moral decadence and aberrant teachings amongst Muslims.

(c) Salafi Orientation in Contemporary Islamic Studies

The rise of the Salafi-Wahhabi orientation is much linked to the expansion of Saudi Arabia's influence in the Islamic world, which coincided with the rise of "petrol-Islam" and propagation of Wahhabi teachings since the 1970s. The establishment of new Islamic universities in Saudi Arabia and the neighbouring Gulf states formalized the learning of the Salafi-Wahhabi tradition within an academic setting. These oil-rich states offered generous scholarships for students to pursue Islamic studies in their campuses. While the Salafi orientation showed some similarity to the traditionalist if measured by its textual/scriptural emphasis, it departs from the Azharite orthodoxy in four main areas. First, its heavily reliance on the Salafi genealogy attributed to the ideas of Ibn Taymiyyah (b.1263–d.1328) and Ibn Hanbal (b.780–d.855) and the teachings of Muhammad Abdul al Wahab (b.1703–d.1792), the founder of the Salafi-Wahhabi school of thought. Second, while the Azharite tradition celebrates the four Sunni *mazhab* (legal schools of thoughts of Hanafi, Maliki, Shafie, and Hanbali), the Salafi-Wahhabi gives premium to Hanbali school of thought. Even then it is the study of *hadith* (narrations of the Prophet Muhammad) that is central to the Salafi-Wahhabi school, rather than *fiqh* (legal). Third, doctrinal formulations deemed to be outside the fold of the Quran and hadith, such as the *kalam* theology, or *tasawuf* (the mystical tradition of Islam) are dismissed altogether. The primacy of literal reading of texts, supplemented with hadith sources, is the hallmark of this mode of thinking. Lastly, the Wahhabi orientation is averse to local customs and inherited tradition; it deems the accommodation of Islamic dogma to local culture and

custom as *bid'ah* (innovation), that departs from the authentic Islam which they uphold.

It is in this context that graduates from these universities that uphold the Salafi-Wahhabi doctrine are often seen as "hardliners" within the asatizah circle, especially when they espouse a dismissive attitude towards local religious practices. These include *maulid* (celebration of the Prophet Mohamad's birthday), *ziarah* (visitation of graves and veneration of tombs of saintly figures) and *tariqah* (rituals associated with sufi/mystical traditions). They also insist on strict observations of social and personal conduct in the public sphere and outrightly reject Shia as falling within the fold of Islam. Obviously the importation of social sciences from the West has no place in their curriculum, unless it has been "Islamized".

In many Muslim societies, the ascendancy of Salafi-Wahhabi groups has caused much anxiety, soliciting even stronger responses against the Salafi-Wahhabi teachings by the traditionalists. The rise of the *habaib* movement in Indonesia is a case in point (Rijal 2020). In the Salafi-Wahhabi thinking, not unlike religious traditionalism, there is the puritanical tendency to believe in the absolute idea that all reality exists in texts, and any attempts to depart from them are deemed as transgressions that undermine Islam. Renouncing the bulk of Islamic learning and traditions which have accumulated over the centuries, the Salafi-Wahhabi thinking takes pride in being the "pure" and "authentic" guardian of the religion. Dominant orthodox Sunni groups, including Sufi circles and reformist/progressive groups, reject the Salafi-Wahhabi claims.

Today, within the ranks of asatizah and leading preachers in Singapore, Salafi-Wahhabi thinking is no stranger as evident in public religious discourse. The vocalness of this group in denouncing age-old customs and practices has caused much unhappiness as well as anxieties, even to a point of making the religious traditionalists on guard within their own domain in which they used to have full control and influence. Leading Muslim scholars have strongly cautioned against this Wahhabi mode of thinking, calling it extremism (El Fadl 2007).

(d) Discursive, Intellectually Eclectic and Reformistic Islamic Studies

This mode of thinking may not be emblematic of a single institution in Islamic studies, as it exists in the teaching of individual scholars in various colleges throughout the Muslim world. This orientation is marked by the following proclivities: (a) affirming reformist ideals by emphasizing rationalist tradition as key in the formulation of Muslim thought; (b) the incorporation and accommodation of modern branches of knowledge imperative for the wellbeing of Muslims; (c) the openness to incorporate social sciences, philosophy and other critical branches of human knowledge as integral to Islamic thought and discourse; (d) awareness of the need to expand the Islamic intellectual corpus to address contemporary challenges including pluralism, democratization, gender inequalities, educational underdevelopment, intellectual insularity, religious violence and exclusivism, environmental degradation, and other forms of authoritarian and dehumanized thinking.

Unfortunately in the Sunni Muslim world, the reformist mode of thinking has never been the dominant mode of thought; by contrast, many consider the concerns raised by the reformers to be undermining traditional Islamic learning, if not succumbing to the western or liberal Muslim agenda. Denying space for reformist ideas also leads to the marginalization of intellectual openness, necessary for familiarizing the community with comparative religious studies and peace studies, which can then foster strong organic links with local communities.

The Indonesian State Islamic Universities (Universitas Islam Negeri or UIN), especially the Jakarta and Jogjakarta branches, are examples of Islamic centres of learning which have demonstrated the above reformist proclivities. The UIN first started as the State Institute of Islamic Learning (IAIN). When Mukti Ali was the Religious Affairs Minister of Indonesia (1973–78), his reformist zeal had allowed for IAIN's bold initiatives and planning, which included sending its ablest students to pursue higher degrees in Islamic studies all over the world. Upon completion of their courses, they would return to Indonesia to teach in IAIN.

While Indonesian Islamic studies institutions today have also retained normative-confessional features, spaces for discursive curriculum and research are abundant. Zamakhsyari Dhofier considered this planning as the Indonesian government's attempt at intellectualizing Indonesian Islamic studies, consciously planned to integrate Islamic and western intellectual traditions (Dhofier 1992). One noticeable feature is the incorporation of social sciences and other branches of modern knowledge into the Islamic studies curriculum and discourse. These can be seen from academic publications in the form of monographs, journals and theses that these institutes produced. It is not uncommon to find in the Indonesian Islamic studies discourse familiarity with sociological, psychological, philosophical and critical literacy concepts and concerns.

Today, leading Muslim scholars and academics in Indonesia are the products of this creative educational engineering. From their *pesantren* background, they later pursued Islamic studies locally and abroad, sponsored either by the Indonesian government or scholarships abroad. These scholars include Tengku Hasbi As-Shidiqque (graduated from the Al-Azhar University), Nurcholish Madjid (graduated from the University of Chicago), Ahmad Syafii Maarif (graduated from the University of Chicago), Azyumardi Azra (graduated from the Leiden University), Moeslim Abdurahman (graduated from the University of Illinois), Amin Abdullah (graduated from the University of Istanbul), Quraish Shihab (graduated from the Al-Azhar University) and Aqil Siradj (graduated from the Islamic University Medina). Also many of the well-known young Indonesian Islamic scholars are the products of local Islamic universities. From their publication outputs and discursive forums deliberated in the Indonesian public sphere, we can fairly assess the breadth and depth of its producers and audience. Even though the likes of Shihab and Siradj studied in purely Islamic religious sciences, and the latter, a more conservative setting than the former, they turned out to be the most leading progressive and pluralist thinkers in Indonesia, mainly due to their strong grasp of Islamic sciences and local cultures drawn from their stints in the local pesantren.

With diverse training of leading Islamic scholars in Indonesia, the Islamic discourse and education in the country has been attuned to diverse schools of thought which in turn helped shape the Islamic studies faculties developed in the Ciputat (south of Jakarta) and Jogjakarta campuses. The Indonesian experience is indeed unique for today's UINs poised with liberal and wide-ranging curriculum not commonly found elsewhere in the Muslim world. With regards to religious studies programmes in the UIN campuses, one observer noted the intellectual openness which allows for "visible engagement with socially relevant issues, and the explicit linking of their field with the promotion of interreligious dialogue and harmonious interfaith relations (Pohl 2015)".

Delineating the varieties of Islamic studies programmes and their general affiliation to certain dominant modes of thinking provide four useful ways to assess the contribution of Islamic studies graduates. Firstly, it enables us to comprehend the terrain of Islamic studies linked to dominant modes of thinking which have direct effect on the religious outlook of asatizah we have within the community. Secondly, by way of comparison, we can assess the reasons for the presence and absences of ideas in discourse generated by the local asatizah by virtue of their training abroad, such as the significance of history in the development of religious rulings, the extent of appreciation of universal Islamic values of compassion, integrity, and justice in attempts to understand texts, the importance given to analysing sources beyond what they are familiar with or have been exposed to during their formative religious training, and the proclivity to study and explore texts used in western and secular traditions. Thirdly, it may suggest areas for reforms needed if we aim for a more organic, reformistic, and progressive mode of thinking to take root in the local Islamic education and discourse. Lastly, we can assess critically the type of Islamic studies that we want to develop for Singapore with full consideration of its needs rooted in the multiracial, urban and global settings.

NOTES

1. But it is interesting to note that although the two types of Islamic studies can be distinguished in terms of its emphasis and intention, there is a common feature between the two. The point raised by Eqbal Ahmed is apt here:

> The field of Islamic studies, strewn with ancient potholes and modern mines, is dominated by apparently different but actually complementary adversaries—the 'traditionalist' ulama and the 'modern' Orientalists. Their methods are different; so are their intentions. Yet, with few exceptions, both tend to view Islam's relationship to politics in fundamentalist and textual terms. Both emphasise the absence of separation between religion and politics in Islam. Both hold an essentially static view of Islam and interpret change and innovations produced by social and economic forces as impingements on establishments, therefore ordained, religious standards. The interplay of the Westerners' academic orthodoxy and the ulama's theological orthodoxy has set the terms of prevalent discourse on Islam (Ahmed 1985).

2. See "New Thinking in Islamic Studies" in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, https://www2.kenyon.edu/Depts/Religion/Fac/Adler/Politics/Islamic%20scholars/Islamic-scholars-colloquy%20.htm (accessed 1 December 2020).

3

SINGAPORE ISLAMIC STUDIES GRADUATES: LEARNING EXPERIENCE AND STRUGGLES

Introduction

The previous chapter examines prevalent types of Islamic education found in the religious educational landscape in the Muslim world. It highlights the dominance of the confessional type that has remained influential in religious teaching and learning. The salient traits of dominant modes of religious orientations evident in these institutions vis-a-vis competing ones, factors conditioning them and their ramifications on the nature of Islamic studies programmes were also examined.

While the types and orientations of religious education have direct implications on conditioning the religious outlook of graduates with ramifications on the well-being of the community and larger society, there remains a lack of serious discourse shedding insights into why Singapore's religious studies graduates have chosen to study religion in the selected universities abroad, the

kinds of religious education which they have obtained from abroad, the impact of dominant religious orientations which permeate the culture of teaching and learning in the institutions they attended on the formation of their religious outlook and perspectives, the problems and challenges they encountered in the course of their learning and upon returning from abroad.

Yet, dominant discourse on religious studies graduates persistently reveal two major issues of concern: the need for *asatizah* to contextualize religious teachings to the condition of Singapore society and the imperative to professionalize them through upskilling training programmes that will equip them for employment relevant to the needs of the community and larger society. The rise of radicalism and terrorism in the name of Islam globally and in the region, which has generated much discourse on its potential adverse ramifications on social cohesion of the nation, underscores these concerns. President Halimah Yacob's speech at the meeting with Singapore's religious studies students studying in Kuwait while on an official visit there in November 2019 encapsulates these concerns. Her advice to asatizah to the effect that they must adapt what they had learnt in Kuwait to promote social cohesion in multiracial and multi-religious Singapore resonates with such concerns (Koh 2019, A12).

Though data on asatizah are pertinent in understanding current problems in religious education and planning for its progress that will serve the needs and conditions of the Muslim community and the country while improving asatizah's development, these remain scarce, disparate and fragmented, not easily accessible. Utilizing data based on responses to a survey questionnaire, as well as in-depth interviews with Islamic studies graduate respondents, this chapter seeks to illuminate these issues.

Mixed methods were utilized to obtain relevant data that can throw light on the nature of asatizah's religious education and its ramifications highlighted above. A representative sample of forty-nine face-to-face, in-depth interviews each lasting between one and a half and two hours were conducted with Islamic studies graduates on an individual basis. Participants' gender, year of graduation,

institutional affiliation, employment as well as the universities they graduated from were taken into consideration in the selection of the respondents to ensure a more representative sample. The majority selected were mainly those who had completed their degree in the last two decades from major universities in the Muslim world. These included Al-Azhar University (in Egypt), International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM in Malaysia), Islamic Science University of Malaysia (USIM in Malaysia), University of Malaya (UM in Malaysia), National University of Malaysia (UKM in Malaysia), Yarmouk University (YU in Jordan), University of Jordan (UJ in Jordan), Islamic University of Madinah (IUM in Saudi Arabia), and Istanbul University (in Turkey). Graduates from Singapore-based institutions offering diploma courses leading up to Islamic studies degrees were also interviewed. The focus on graduates returning from overseas in dominant discourse has to some extent downplayed the role played by these local institutions which have entered into partnership with overseas universities. They offer twining programmes which are also well subscribed by the local asatizah. While we maintain anonymity as far as possible, we tried to use their original quotes.

We also supplement our interviews with quantitative data derived from responses to a survey questionnaire. Altogether 127 graduates responded to the survey which was captured in numerical forms. In determining our sample, we considered several variables mirroring the actual Islamic graduates' population. Some of the questions we sought from the survey were as follows: What were the socio-economic and educational background of Islamic studies graduates? What were the factors that motivated the graduates to undertake religious studies at the tertiary level? What were the factors that influenced their choice of universities? What were their perceptions of religious education in neighbouring countries vis-à-vis those in the Middle East such as Al-Azhar University which has been the most popular destination for Singapore madrasah graduates over the decades? What was the nature of religious education that dominated the institutions they enrolled into and their modes of teaching and learning? What were the challenges they encountered while studying and what were

the major difficulties they faced upon their return to Singapore? The questionnaire also sought responses for whom they regarded as their spiritual and intellectual mentors. Data pertaining to their socio-economic and educational profile, gender, educational history and fields of study, educational and employment experiences were also captured. Sixty-three per cent of our survey respondents are females and 37 per cent are males. This distribution corresponded to reality whereby female graduates outnumber male graduates. In terms of age, 47.2 per cent are between 22 and 27 years old, 33.1 per cent are 28–35 years old, and the rest are above 35 years old. The majority attended madrasah education in Singapore: 39.4 per cent from Madrasah Aljunied Al-Islamiah, 12.6 per cent Madrasah Wak Tanjong Al-Islamiah, 12.6 per cent Madrasah Alsagoff Al-Arabiah, and 11.8 per cent from Madrasah Al-Ma'arif Al-Islamiah. About 7.1 per cent of those surveyed were from private schools, such as Al-Zuhri Institute of Higher Learning. In terms of socio-economic profiles of the respondents, 18.1 per cent earn less than $1,500, 26.8 per cent earn between $1,501 and $2,500, 11.8 per cent earn between $2,501 and $3,000, and the rest more than $3,000.

The sample is also reflective of the population of the asatizah community based on the university they graduated from. Thirty-six per cent of the respondents graduated from universities in Egypt, 32 per cent from Malaysia, 8 per cent Jordan, 4 per cent Saudi Arabia, and 16 per cent others. About 52.8 per cent of the graduates who participated in the survey obtained their first degree between 2015 and 2020, 20.5 per cent between 2010 and 2014, while 9.4 per cent graduated between 2005 and 2009. While our survey respondents are mostly fresh graduates and those in their twenties to early forties, our face-to-face interviews target their seniors including those in their mid-thirties and above.

The responses also revealed that 59.1 per cent of the respondents were working full-time, mainly as madrasah teachers and religious functionaries and administrators either in Muis, mosques or Muslim organizations, while 25.2 per cent were either doing part-time work or freelancing. We also encountered those employed in the

following sectors: human resource, research, family development, property market, pre-school education, logistics, and information technology (IT).

Educational Background of Islamic Studies Graduates

To be an asatizah, it is not necessary to possess a full-time primary madrasah background. Some of our interviewees shared that they started their education in one of the national schools before switching to the madrasah system.[1] Some made the change at the primary school level, and some at the secondary school level. We also met ARS-certified asatizah without any madrasah background but graduated from degree courses in religious studies. This raises the question of whether madrasah education is necessary for those who wish to become an asatizah in Singapore as is dominantly perceived. The Muslim community in Singapore largely funds the madrasah unlike national schools, which are fully subsidized by the government.

Nevertheless, the number of graduates who did not complete twelve years of full madrasah education is small compared to those who completed their primary, secondary and pre-university levels in the religious school system. Almost all of the current pool of Singapore asatizah had attended one of the local madrasahs. As mentioned in the previous chapters, the madrasah education had undergone evolution, but introduction of the Joint Madrasah System (JMS) in 2009 had realigned each of the six full-time madrasahs' priorities. Madrasah Al-Irsyad Al-Islamiah (renamed to Madrasah Irsyad Zuhri Al-Islamiah in 2015) now focuses on primary education, while Madrasah Aljunied Al-Islamiah on secondary education leaning towards religious content, and Madrasah Al-Arabiah Al-Islamiah on secondary education leaning towards secular content. The other three madrasahs, Alsagoff Al-Arabiah, Wak Tanjong and Al-Ma'arif Al-Islamiah, continue to enrol students from primary to pre-university levels.

The majority of the graduates interviewed were not affected by the JMS change as they had studied under the previous system.

Most studied in the same madrasah from primary one up to the pre-university level. Before the JMS was implemented, all six madrasahs offered a mix of religious and non-religious subjects, but after the secondary level, students had to choose from many possible routes. For example, those who left Madrasah Aljunied were given diplomas which would enable them to be considered for a BA programme at the Al-Azhar University. Students from other madrasahs such as Wak Tanjong and Al-Maarif sat for the GCE A levels, which gave them the opportunity to enrol into any Singapore universities such as the National University of Singapore (NUS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), and Singapore Management University (SMU).

These multiple pathways resulted from the different madrasahs signing independent and uncoordinated memorandums with different universities overseas. Madrasah Aljunied signed a memorandum with Al-Azhar University in 1975, while Madrasah Wak Tanjong, Madrasah Al-Ma'arif, and Madrasah Alsagoff signed similar agreements fairly recently. Madrasah Al-Ma'arif signed a memorandum with Al-Azhar University in 2005. These madrasahs rely on Syeikh Abdel Maqsud Elsayed Elsayed, an Egyptian scholar based in Singapore, who has connection with Al-Azhar University. He also helped Al-Ma'arif and Wak Tanjong obtain recognition from the university, which we reckon was after 2000.[2] Because of this lack of contact between local madrasahs and overseas Islamic universities, some graduates shared that upon completing their pre-university education in one of the local madrasahs, they enrolled in boarding schools in Malaysia, which had already signed agreements with universities in the Middle East. Some madrasah graduates who wanted to pursue a degree in Al-Azhar University could not do so because the madrasah did not formalize any agreement with the university, thus they had to spend more time in Malaysia and only attended their final year in the Middle East. A female graduate shared that after pursuing GCE O levels at Madrasah Wak Tanjong, she had to enrol in Malaysian colleges that offered twinning programmes with Al-Azhar University (Interview with Saenah, 2018).

Factors Conditioning Motivation for Pursuing Religious Education

Responses based on the survey reveal that generally students ended up in madrasah because of their parents. Nazirah, a graduate from Al-Azhar University, recalled that her father aspired for all his children to become religious scholars such as the likes of Imam Abu Abdillah Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafie, or Al-Shafie in short (b.767–d.820). In his words, "If you cannot be Imam Shafie, to be his nails is good enough" (Interview with Nazirah, 2018). Generally, parents tend to decide their children's educational pathway when they are merely seven or eight years old. Parents' decision to enrol their children into the religious stream also means that they determine their children's career paths at a relatively young age, rather than giving them the choice of their vocation when they mature.

The trend of sending children to madrasah grew in the 1990s, during the Islamic resurgence period. Majority of the graduates shared that their parents were not the products of the madrasah system. Among the reasons for why parents sent their children to madrasah are the following: desire for at least one of the children to be an asatizah; the perception that madrasah education provides good moral/Islamic education, and the strong tendency to associate the madrasah with an "Islamic environment" that provides moral values and a safe milieu against adverse, secular influences unlike the national schools. Interestingly, these parents felt that religious education cannot be taught at home and they considered part-time weekend religious classes insufficient for the cultivation of religious knowledge. Badruddin, an Al-Azhar graduate of the 2016 cohort, shared how he ended up being in one of the madrasahs.

> My father always wanted someone in the family to go to Al-Azhar [university] because [of what] he saw… secular students were not [behaving] very well. So he wanted me to go to madrasah. But my mum who was from secular background (student) until tertiary level, said: madrasah students won't succeed in life. But

> in the end, they [allowed] a 7-year-old child to choose. So, I chose Madrasah Aljunied (Interview with Badruddin, 2019).

While Badruddin's parents differed on where he should be schooled, their differences were not on their evaluation of madrasah education but on its implications on prospects for employment. While his mother had reservations about the madrasah, her main concern was whether he can find a job with such an education. In fact, their sentiment of the madrasah system mirrors the thinking of many Muslims in the context of the resurgence of Islam since the 1980s. A distinct trait of this orientation is the tendency to succumb to essentialist notions that only Islamic schools can equip children with moral values that will safeguard them against the influence of "secularism" which they strongly associated with atheism and the destruction of belief in absolute values deemed to be epitomized by the West.

Some parents insisted on sending their children to madrasah regardless of whether they will eventually end up as an asatizah. They feel that their children should be given the option to make the switch to mainstream educational institutions—such as Junior College (JC) or polytechnics—at a later stage in their education journey.[3]

> Within my family, I am the first [one to enrol into] in the madrasah stream. They [my family members] didn't have high hopes. I think none of them had high hopes [for me]. But as with the CE [compulsory education] PSLE, I proved to them that "[I] can pass!" and then [completed] the O levels as well. And many times, they would say: because you passed your PSLE why don't you continue [your education in] the secular school? After O levels, you have the potential, why don't you continue [in the secular] stream? There'll be more opportunities, so why do you continue in a madrasah? But I always felt that pressure [that I have] to continue to study [in a] madrasah (Interview with Badruddin, 2019).

In the past, it was common to find parents sending their children to madrasah so that they can become a religious teacher. The students enrolled in madrasah also understood their mission when they entered the religious stream, unlike their friends in

the national schools. Students who entered Madrasah Aljunied, for instance, assumed that if they did well, they would be accepted into Al-Azhar University (Norshahril 2018, p. 56). We noticed that some of these madrasah students chose Al-Azhar University even though they did better in the non-religious subjects.

Today, however, parents generally sent their children to the madrasah for different objectives. They want their sons and daughters to study in an "Islamic environment". Shamsul Ahmad, an Islamic studies graduate now in his mid-thirties, shared this observation:

> I don't feel comfortable when people say I send my children to madrasah to get an Islamic environment but not really fulfilling what is intended behind the system, which, I supposed to build scholarship on religion. It's not supposed to create doctors. Even if Muslim doctors you can go and be that through national schools and still give them some Islamic education (Interview with Shamsul Ahmad, 2019).

These parents had studied in the madrasah and had never attended a national school, so they were unsure of what to expect from non-madrasah schools. Shamsul Ahmad added:

> More asatizah [are] sending their children to national schools. Not just because they cannot go to the madrasah. Some cannot go to madrasah. But some really want their children to experience something new. But the reason behind I think, quite a few of them not sending to [national schools], at least among my closer friends, is because they don't know how to manage their children. They have never been through the system. So let's say if you put your children in national schools, [they'll think] 'I don't know how to teach him.' That's one other thing which hinders them. Then naturally, they just find themselves going to where they are comfortable in (Interview with Shamsul Ahmad, 2019).

Nevertheless, most parents were not aware of the limited career opportunities facing Islamic studies graduates whom by virtue of their training in the religious sciences and theology, would face barriers to entry into certain jobs such as the civil and public

service. Opportunities in the public sector are restricted to Muis (departments dealing with theology, such as the fatwa committee) and other Islamic related institutions such as the Sharia Court and Registrar of Muslim Marriages (ROMM). Responses revealed that the majority are employed in the religious sector. Out of the 127 surveyed, only 17.3 per cent respondents mentioned that their education had prepared them for their current job very well, while 36.2 per cent expressed that it had prepared them well. Respondents also complained that there was no point of reference for career guidance prior to their embarking on religious education. They want to acquire skills that can prepare them for the workforce, such as organizational skills, presentation skills, and IT skills.

Graduates Learning Experience from Various Universities

There are no figures publicly available to reveal how many out of the 400 primary one students enrolled in the madrasah each year eventually made it to an Islamic university. It was only in a parliament session in October 2020 that Minister Masagos Zulkifli shared that 35 per cent of each cohort of madrasah students pursue religious education at the tertiary level. It was also revealed that the majority majored in Islamic jurisprudence and theology (Baharudin 2020c). Our estimates suggest that about 120 students per cohort made it to an Islamic university. Majority of the graduates completed their first degree at the Al-Azhar University in Cairo. While there is a growing number of madrasah graduates who chose to enrol in Jordanian and Saudi Arabian universities in the Middle East, the second most popular university for Singapore madrasah students is in fact the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

The following sections compare the graduates' learning experiences in different universities. The sample of respondents factored the different cohorts (based on their age and gender). For instance, when gathering feedback from Al-Azhar graduates, we compared those enrolled in the 1980s with recent graduates

(after 2000). The same methodology applies to graduates from the other universities in order to obtain representative sampling. Female graduates faced different sets of challenges compared to their male counterparts. We also noted that there were differences of opinions and accounts among graduates from the same cohort. The insights shared in the following are based on face-to-face interviews conducted between September 2017 and June 2020. The discussion will be organized according to countries: Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Malaysia. Following that, we will discuss other less popular universities among Singaporean students, such as those in Indonesia, Brunei, Iran, Kuwait, Libya and Syria.

Egypt — Still the Centre of Islamic Studies?

Al-Azhar University has always been the most popular destination for Singapore madrasah students. Prominent religious figures in Singapore graduated from the university, including three muftis: Syed Isa Semait (1972–2010), Mohamed Fatris Bakaram (2011–19) and Nazirudin Mohd Nasir (2019–present). The majority of Singapore's Al-Azhar graduates occupy key positions in Muis, madrasahs, mosques, and NGOs (Pergas and LBKM 2010). The university's popularity among Singapore students is understandable since it has produced prominent religious scholars not only in Singapore or the region, but throughout the Muslim world, past and present. In this regard, many Singaporean students chose Al-Azhar not because they had evaluated its curriculum, but because of its prestige. Some respondents shared that they wished to follow in the footsteps of Mohamed Fatris and Nazirudin, whom they regarded as their idols. Madrasahs also continue to encourage their students to aim for Al-Azhar University, after leaving the primary and secondary madrasah education. An alumni from Madrasah Aljunied shared that during his twelve years as a student at the madrasah, only once did he encountered a teacher who advised students to explore universities other than Al-Azhar University, and the advice came only a few days before he graduated from pre-university at the madrasah (Interview with Farhan, 2018).

The challenges faced by Singapore students studying in Al-Azhar University are manifold. Over the years, there have been marked improvements in the university's administration, management and pedagogy, though these remain relatively poor compared to modern universities. Singapore students who had studied in Al-Azhar University were mostly those who had completed their diploma from Madrasah Aljunied. The two institutions signed a memorandum of understanding early on. Students from the other madrasahs faced less definite pathways before entering the university because there were no formal links established with overseas universities until recently. For example, Saenah, who now teaches at one of the local madrasahs, shared that she enrolled in a twinning programme between KUSZA (now UniSZA)—a college based in Malaysia—and Al-Azhar University, where she spent the first three years in Malaysia and the final two in Cairo (Interview with Saenah, 2018). Those from the other madrasahs would be required to take distant learning via Islamic colleges in Malaysia before being admitted in the final year. The early batches of Al-Azhar graduates spent less than twelve months in Cairo but were still considered Azharis (graduates of Al-Azhar University) and asatizah. For certain, they missed the opportunity to be immersed into the intellectual and religious tradition and learning milieu of the university.

A comparison between the views of graduates from the 1980s and 1990s with those from the 2000s onwards showed that there have been marked improvements in terms of the facilities offered by the university. The lecture halls and students accommodation have been significantly upgraded. Nevertheless, the infrastructure of Cairo, the capital of a developing country, remains underdeveloped. For instance, students' administrative matters continued to be administered manually and not electronically and digitally. Graduates complained that they faced difficulties adjusting to the conditions in Cairo. Furthermore, their accommodation was much to be desired. Mobility from one campus to another was also hampered by poor traffic conditions and pollution.

Across the different batches, the students' feedback was fairly consistent: they struggled with colloquial Arabic spoken in Cairo.

Arabs living in the city speak a different dialect from what Singapore students were taught in the local madrasah. Thus, some graduates recalled that they struggled to follow the lectures especially in the beginning. The more recent batches were able to overcome this challenge better, as they have been briefed by their seniors and madrasah teachers before embarking on their studies in Egypt (Norshahril 2018, p. 67). Still, the graduates were unable to engage with Arab students on campus. They could not participate in the intellectual discursive culture which was dominated by Arab students. Feedback revealed that they hardly contributed to any discursive platforms and activities such as the campus newsletters, the equivalent of academic journals in western universities. According to Firman, who graduated from Al-Azhar University,

> We were encouraged to contribute columns for our society's magazines. And if there was interest, we could write for Arab magazines, or notices within the university compounds. But we did not, not because we were lazy, but we experienced culture shock, and had other priorities (Interview with Firman, 2018).

By contrast, Indonesian graduates from the same university have been given platforms to lecture in Middle Eastern universities and academic forums. One example is Quraish Shihab from Indonesia who lectured at the university before the Arab audience, demonstrating his mastery and confidence in the Arabic language. For current Singapore students, the university is now trying to rectify the low standards of Arabic amongst Southeast Asian students by making it mandatory for them to attend a one-year Arabic language course before enrolling in the university.

Staying in Cairo has its advantages and disadvantages. Safety is a top concern for students, especially the females. The graduates shared how they had to self-impose a curfew so that when they leave their homes for informal classes or returned home late, they had the company of at least one Singaporean male student. Cases of theft and sexual harassment were not uncommon in Cairo. The students, however, felt that they were comfortable with the cost of living in the city and found accommodation affordable.

Shared lodging with their seniors and fellow students, reduced expenditure on housing significantly. The majority of them stayed in the Seventh District, Nasr City, Cairo, which housed many Southeast Asian students as well, namely from Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. An association for Singapore students in Al-Azhar University (Perkemas) was also set up; students rented out two apartments in the same district. The centre functions as a base for student activities, where they regularly met and conducted academic and non-academic activities together. The apartments had undergone a major refurbishment since it was founded in the 1960s.

Compared to modern universities, the learning environment at the university was not ideal. The teacher-student ratio was not optimum. The number of students taught by any one lecturer was disproportionately large. A typical class for the faculties of Sharia or Arabic language could comprise about 200 students at one time, while a class in theology, about 40 students. There were no tutorials within this traditional mode of teaching and learning. Singapore students generally lack confidence and do not openly ask questions in class which further impeded engagement with other students and lecturers (Interview with Nazirah, 2018). Apart from this, the assessment system did not require students to undertake written assignments. The only form of assessment within the system was the examinations in which memorization of texts was the dominant criterion of assessment at the expense of critical and analytical skills in application of knowledge. Generally, Singapore students' efficacy in Arabic language is also not as strong compared to their counterparts in Egypt. Students in the madrasah learn three languages—English, Mother Tongue (Malay), and Arabic. Most face difficulties in mastering these languages which only a few are able to develop strong proficiency in.

Today, those in authoritative positions in the community are beginning to question Al-Azhar's effectiveness as a centre of Islamic learning. This will have policy implications for future madrasah graduates. The signal given to madrasah students is that they should explore other universities outside Cairo. The increasing number of madrasah graduates enrolled in Jordanian universities suggests that Al-Azhar is no longer a premium choice

as the centre for Islamic learning.[4] While diversifying educational pathways for madrasah graduates has its merits, this has generally not been accompanied by an objective awareness of strengths and limitations of these universities especially in the area of pedagogy and dominant orientations.

For certain, the Al-Azhar graduates we interviewed do not uphold radical beliefs. They are also against puritan thought characteristic of Salafi-Wahhabism. There are some concerns that the university is becoming more extreme than in the past because of the close ties between the governments of Saudi Arabia and Egypt (under President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi). Some scholars argue that Saudi Arabia is exporting neo-Salafism into Egypt (Abdelhalim 2017). For example, the views of Saudi Arabian scholars are cited by their Egyptian counterparts in political and gender discourses in the university. Nevertheless, these cases do not represent the general orientation of the institution. Even if there are pockets of such influences in Cairo, Singapore students there are generally not participatory to such discourse. The *ulama* holding key positions in the university are known not to uphold or propagate extreme views. Furthermore, the Singapore students tend to keep to themselves and do not interact with students from the Middle East or other countries. Their interaction is largely confined to those from Southeast Asia, particularly their Malaysian counterparts. Even their interaction with Indonesian students is relatively conscribed.[5]

A common feedback gathered from the graduates is that rote learning and memorization remain the main method of knowledge transmission. Added to this, the graduates complained that contact with their professors was minimal. Until recently, class attendance was not compulsory, and only students with the personal drive to do well would attend classes regularly. However, the graduates shared some positive aspects about the Al-Azhar education. The university offers a type of Islamic learning not available elsewhere: the *halaqahs* and *dars* (Norshahril and Nur Diyana 2019) or informal learning which is integral to the teaching culture at Al-Azhar, where students attended supplementary study groups within the compounds of the Al-Azhar mosque. Attendance at

these informal gatherings added value to the students' learning experiences, especially in the mastery of classical texts. There were concerns whether such gatherings could be platforms for the promotion of radical ideas. However, this was unlikely so as the teachers were approved by the authorities and the university. Senior students also guided juniors on the selection of teachers in these informal circles.

The graduates highlighted that informal learning exposed them to alternative discourses and viewpoints in a more interesting and engaging manner unlike normal classroom settings in which they felt was a top-down process. Students were free to choose which scholars they wanted to study with, and which fields they wished to pursue. Prominent religious thinkers in neighbouring Indonesia also attest that the Al-Azhar education is not necessarily weak. Rather, the students' learning depends on how they allocated and utilized their time and resources. Quraish Shihab, professor of Quranic exegesis from Indonesia, known for his progressive ideas and openness in embracing diversity, maintained that the Al-Azhar learning experience contributed to his deep intellectual thought. In his book *Sunnah-Syiah Bergandengan Tangan! Mungkinkah?* [Sunni-Shia Holding Hands. Is that Possible?], he shared that while studying at the university, he was taught by prominent *sheikhs* such as Mahmud Syaltut, Abdulhalim Mahmud, Muhammad al-Madany and Muhammad al-Gazaly, through whose teachings he learnt to be more accepting of diverse views including those which Southeast Asian Muslims consider deviant (Shihab 2006). This is not to say that all graduates from the university will be progressive and inclusive, but the exposure to diverse religious opinions is clearly a strength of the university.

The graduates shared that the Egyptian society is open to diverse views. For example, they observed that while Egyptian Shias feel marginalized, their relationship with the Sunnis is peaceful, unlike in Malaysia and Indonesia (Mohd Faizal 2020; Suryana 2020). There is a mosque in Cairo—Al-Hakim Mosque—that unites the Sunnis and Shias, and followers of the two sects can pray side by side. Singapore students related how they also witnessed alternative viewpoints through the Al-Azhar experience.

One student shared that once he saw the Sheikh of Al-Azhar, Ahmed Tayeb, shaking hands with men and women, even though in Southeast Asia today (after the Islamic resurgence of the 1970s), religious elites hold the view that opposite gender who do not come from the same family should not have any physical contact with one another unless in exigent circumstances (Norshahril and Nur Diyana 2019, p. 6).[6]

For students who did not attend such informal learning circles, their engagement was restricted to campus and student associations. While this experience is not required for them to graduate, it limits their intellectual exposure and training especially for those aspiring to teach or become a religious scholar (ulama). The interviews reveal that the graduates were not exposed to the intellectual tradition of Egypt which has given birth to progressive thinkers. When asked to name some of their spiritual mentors and intellectuals who have shaped their thought, they could not go beyond naming a few of their lecturers. Interestingly, they could name the Singapore muftis and ulama. The lack of reference to contemporary scholars within their fields of study also provides stark indication of their limited exposure to contemporary intellectual thought in Cairo. We also suggested some names of critical Middle Eastern scholars whose works are taught in Indonesian boarding schools, such as Hassan Hanafi and Jabir Al-Jazari. Yet, the Singapore graduates were unable to relate to these prominent intellectuals and shared that they have never heard of them (Interview with Danial, 2019).

Jordan as the New Centre of Islamic Learning

Lately, there has been a surge in interest to find out more about alternative Islamic institutions to Al-Azhar University. This interest was sparked by the 2013 military coup in Egypt which led to the toppling of Mohammed Morsi's government. The coup led to the return of military rule led by El-Sisi, after a brief period of democratic rule (between 2011 and 2013) and political turmoil and uncertainty. The rise of El-Sisi marked the return of politics under Hosni Mubarak. The coup affected Singapore students

in Egypt, forcing them to return to Singapore immediately for safety reasons. Some parents were unable to immediately fly them back to Singapore due to financial reasons. This episode forced political leaders, religious elites, and administrators to rethink the pros and cons of allowing students to study in Egypt given the political uncertainty there that could lead to disruptions in the students' education.[7]

Before 2015, universities in Jordan were not popular destinations for Singapore madrasah graduates.[8] It was only after the Arab Spring in 2011 that a number of Singaporean students enrolled in Islamic studies programmes in the country. The lack of enthusiasm for Jordan universities were mainly due to a couple of reasons: (a) the Jordan Ministry of Higher Education did not have any memorandum of understanding with Singapore madrasahs and lacked familiarity with the madrasah's standards; (b) Singapore students continued to look up to Al-Azhar University. The cost of living in Jordan—being a more developed country compared to Egypt—was another reason why Singapore students chose Al-Azhar over Jordan universities.

Two universities in Jordan in particular have been most popular among Singaporean students. They are the University of Jordan (UJ) and Yarmouk University (YU) respectively. Today, these universities host the second highest number of Singaporean students estimated at 150 in the Middle East, second to Al-Azhar University. These universities are not Islamic colleges but offer programmes on Islam and theology. They also adopt an open attitude towards attire in campus, unlike those in Egypt, Malaysia or Saudi Arabia. However, Singapore graduates who enrolled there tended to pursue Islamic studies. We came across only one recent graduate from UJ who majored in Sociology.[9] The student shared that it was a huge challenge for her to adapt to the curriculum with her madrasah background. The Arabic medium of instruction of the discipline compounded the challenge. In her words:

> Because learning Sociology is not so easy for us from madrasah... it's a totally different thing from what you study in school. There are students who take up Arabic and then for the first year,

> they have to go through introduction to Sociology, and they are complaining because they can't grasp the idea of that (Interview with Alimah, 2019).

For Alimah's case, the university considered her academic performance in her first year, when she was doing Arabic literature, before allowing her to make the switch. She would not have qualified for the course with her Singapore madrasah certificate.

Responses revealed that the graduates from Jordan universities liked the systematic approach which was similar to modern western-style universities. They were required to complete written assessments and term papers every semester. The modes of assessment also included the final examination, class participation and attendance (Interview with Salman Amin, 2019), unlike the system in Egypt. They also maintained that this experience helped them develop some experience in writing. In addition, the universities allowed them to do subjects from other faculties and department and offered major and minor programmes that exposed them to more than one discipline. Each student took six modules per semester on average.

The modes of teaching religious studies in Jordan universities, however, do not differ much from Al-Azhar, though students from the latter demonstrate more familiarity with classical religious texts and scholarship. The graduates also shared that the teaching of religious subjects emphasized and promoted memorization and rote learning of texts (Interview with Lutfi Amir, 2019). One of the students who graduated from a Jordan university commented that her fellow university mates from Singapore lacked critical skills and did not venture into areas outside theology and religious sciences. She shared:

> ... if you want to write in a research paper, like a literature review, they [Jordan students] don't even know what a literature review is. They only stay in their lane, like the shariah subjects. They dare not explore other subjects as their electives. They want to stay in their comfort zone (Interview with Alimah, 2019).

However, the graduate highlighted freedom as one of the main virtues of studying in Jordan universities. They claimed that the students are exposed to a variety of ideas from puritan to progressive ones. By contrast, some graduates reckoned that too much freedom without proper guidance led to problems for them. One of the earliest students from Singapore who studied in Jordan shared how he was exposed to what he called foreign ideology and was almost influenced by it. Lutfi Amir shared that he was once invited into the Al-Ahbash circle, not knowing what the group stood for.

> I was actually studying from the Al-Ahbash, I didn't even know that they were Ahbash. The Ahbash had a very strong [influence] in Jordan and they were penetrating the Malaysian [students]. For example, we lived in Shari' Jamiah, a popular street [close to the campus in Irbid]. … That stretch [of road] was full of Malaysians, [and] they literally bought a building in front of our building [where we stayed]. It became their community centre. So at level 1, all the PS (PlayStation) [for the students who likes gaming]; at Level 2, [for] ping pong [table tennis] enthusiasts; at Level 3, [for] pool lovers; [and] at Level 4, a place for studying religion. And Arabs too came to join these study groups, but they don't know they were [from] Ahbash. I wasn't [involved with the groups] because my Palestinian friends cautioned [me about them].[10]

According to this respondent, one of the teachings promoted by this group was that students should free themselves from parental control (Interview with Lutfi Amir, 2018).

The popularity of universities in Jordan is increasing among Singaporean students. However, those who have already graduated expressed caution with this trend. While Jordan is undoubtedly one of the most advanced countries in the Middle East, its universities are not ranked highly internationally. More data from Malaysians and Indonesians who have studied in these universities are relevant and useful in planning for higher religious education for local students, in particular the mode of orientation and type of religious education that dominate in these institutions. Studies

on the religious thought of Malaysian and Indonesian graduates from Jordan universities based on their writings and publications can also serve useful in providing insights into the impact of their religious education in these institutions though other relevant factors cannot be overlooked.

Some graduates acknowledged that what was missing from the Jordan experience was exposure to critical thinking and Islamic intellectual tradition of the classical period, which Al-Azhar University could offer. There are also more opportunities for students in Cairo to access informal learning compared to Jordan. We observe that Al-Azhar students can name the basic classical texts for *fiqh, tafsir, tauhid,* and Arabic, especially those from the Shafie school of thought. Such informal learning milieu also exists in Jordan, but they are not as well developed compared to Egypt. This was confirmed by Salman Amin, a graduate from the University of Jordan, who shared: "In Egypt, they have their own *talaqi* (informal learning) so that is something that we have less [in Jordan]. So, most of the time we just spend doing our own activities…go to our friends' house" (Interview with Salman Amin, 2019). The lack of opportunities to engage in informal learning also meant that these students spent more time with their friends from Singapore and were actively involved in Singapore student associations, such as SIRAJ (Interview with Salman Amin, 2019). SIRAJ is a student body that represents Singapore students from two Jordan universities: UJ and Yarmouk. Unlike the Perkemas in Al-Azhar, SIRAJ is a students' network for Singaporeans studying in Jordan not affiliated with any university. Salman Amin shared that while in Jordan, he mixed around with students from the other parts of the world; yet, he said that as the number of Singapore students grow, they tend to stick together (Interview with Salman Amin, 2019).

While the graduates acknowledged that their lecturers showed respect for diversity of views, the examples given tend to reveal that these were confined to theological viewpoints between Salafism versus Sufism, matters of rituals, and not contemporary theological debates. For example, Shiism is already condemned as un-Islamic and not considered mainstream. The irony is that

condemning Shiism as deviant contradicts views upheld by the Jordan King (which will be discussed shortly). Academics in the university also frown upon ideas considered to be "liberal". For example, ideas promoted by gender rights scholars are not taught (Interview with Salman Amin, 2019). Ahmad Latif, who had the experience of witnessing how lessons were conducted in Jordan universities and Al-Azhar, but undertook his BA at the University of Malaysia, agreed that Jordan universities do not offer the depth of knowledge in classical Islamic scholarship as compared to Al-Azhar University. Jordan universities programmes are mainly useful as an introduction to Islamic studies (Interview with Ahmad Latif, 2019).

Progressive discourse propagated at the Jordanian state level, especially by King Abdullah Hussein do not necessarily trickle down to the teaching and learning within universities, including in Islamic studies. Many would perceive Jordan as a moderate Muslim country, but apparently, the views of the King, for example, do not represent the thinking of Islamic leaders. To illustrate, based on our survey and face-to-face interviews with Jordanian graduates, we learn that they are not familiar with the Amman Message of 2004 during their student days. It was only after attending the Code of Ethics course conducted by Muis that they became aware of it. The declaration was the Jordan King's initiative to promote peace and unity between the different sects of Islam, including the Sunnis and Shias. There are three fundamental points of the Amman Message that are useful for Singapore Muslims in developing tolerance and appreciation across different faiths and intra-faith groups: the recognition of eight *mazhabs* (sects) in Sunni, Shia and Ibadi; forbidding *takfir* (declaration of apostasy); and exposing ignorant and illegitimate sects based on the agreed and objective conditions for the issuing of religious opinions (*fatwas*) (The Amman Message 2004).

We are not suggesting that all graduates from Jordan universities are regressive or conservative. There is little evidence to assert that they are different from Al-Azhar graduates. Compared to the Malaysians and Indonesians, Singaporean students are relatively newcomers to Jordan universities. Some religious views from the

former, for instance, are quite problematic in terms of the promotion of political Islam.[11] Some of the ideas, such as the promotion of an Islamic state, implementation of Sharia laws in the extreme form that continue to be harboured and propagated by graduates from Jordan universities, are clearly contrary to the well-being of the Muslim community and the larger society. We are also aware that some of them are even inclined to conservative, puritan Salafi-Wahhabi ideas promoted in Saudi Arabia. While their religious education may not be the only conditioning factor, it cannot be overlooked in understanding the phenomenon. There has to be a proper evaluation not only of the curriculum across different universities in Jordan that can inform policy changes. More also need to be done in terms of critical assessment of the modes of teaching and learning and the dominant types of religious education and orientations that prevail in these universities.

Saudi Arabia and the Salafi-Wahhabi Orientation

The Islamic University of Madinah in Saudi Arabia records the second highest number of Singapore graduates in the Middle East, although the Jordanian universities are slowly catching up. The university has been enrolling students since the 1970s (Interview with Sameer, 2019) and is unique compared to other Islamic universities for several reasons: it enrols mostly male students; students receive full funding from the Saudi Arabia government including school fees and accommodation; and attendance for classes are compulsory. Apart from low cost of living and the fact that their education is fully taken care of with the support of scholarships, the university is unique because applicants do not require any Islamic studies background to be admitted. This means that Singapore students in Saudi Arabia may have studied in national schools, and not the madrasah before making the switch to Islamic studies. In fact, the majority of our respondents from Al-Madinah University did not attend full-time madrasah.

The graduates shared that the university taught the Sunni school of thought. The only difference with other Middle Eastern

universities is the study of theology, which according to the graduates, bore strong Salafi-Wahhabi leaning. As discussed, Salafi-Wahhabi is a puritan orientation which holds that only what they define as authentic Quranic interpretations, Prophetic narrations, and opinions from the first three generations after the Prophet's death are considered religiously authentic. The school of thought strongly rejects what they deem as innovation in religion. The lack of emphasis on learning classical texts also runs contrary to the dominant Shafie and Sufi learning traditions amongst the Malays in the region. The puritans consider some of the rituals practised in Southeast Asia, such as the celebration of the Prophet's birthday (*maulid*), visitations of graves for the purpose of obtaining blessings (*ziarah*), and mass prayers to mourn Muslims who have passed on (*tahlil*) as innovations and thus un-Islamic. Graduates shared that they faced difficulties adjusting to local conditions after returning to Singapore, and some confessed that they came back with firebrand religious views initially. On campus, they were taught the works of Ibn Taymiyyah—widely regarded by Salafi-Wahhabis to be their ideologue. In fact, twenty volumes of Ibn Taymiyyah's works were distributed to all students at no cost (Interview with Sameer, 2019).

A University of Madinah graduate disclosed that he was swept by the impact of the Salafi-Wahhabi thought.[12] But after proactively seeking alternative viewpoints, such as speaking to ulama from Jordan, and hearing what they shared about Ibn Taymiyyah's fatwa, he began to be more receptive of Islamic tradition in Southeast Asia. The graduate shared that he grew up with local religious teachers and was active with Tablighi Jamaat, as well as Sufi groups (he frequented Baalwie mosque in Singapore known to uphold Sufi idealism and teaching). However, the Islamic University of Madinah (IUM) type of orientation was impactful in shaping his initial radical views about religion. He acknowledged that he was not the only one and that some of his contemporaries were also very puritan, if not worse than him in implementing the Salafi-Wahhabi doctrine. Some of his peers who graduated from the same university, he shared, were upset that he is no longer promoting the Salafi-Wahhabi thought (Interview with Sameer, 2019).

So strong is the university's ideological indoctrination that students caught promoting practices contravening the Salafi-Wahhabi doctrine faced the threat of being sacked from the university. A former student from Singapore, Syarif Ahmad, shared that he heard of a case where a PhD candidate was dismissed from the university for promoting doctrines not in line with the Salafi-Wahhabi teachings. The student, who completed his BA and MA from the same university even had his degrees revoked. Syarif Ahmad also heard rumours of his imminent sacking from the university for the same reason, but he quit the university before action was taken against him. Such was the strictness of the university in promoting the Salafi-Wahhabi ideology.

The example shared by Syarif Ahmad also demonstrates that while Saudi Arabia's brand of Salafi-Wahhabism can change a student's outlook, students can unlearn what they have been taught (Interview with Ahmad Yusuf, 2018). Recent graduates (post-2000) shared that they too had to adjust and unlearn what was taught in the university and felt not everything they learnt can be applied to Singapore's context. For instance, Kamil Amin said that they were taught to be austere even on minor issues: music, for instance, is considered forbidden according to this ideology. While he considers this issue minor now, that was not how it was perceived when he was a student there (Interview with Kamil Amin, 2019).

Nevertheless, the stigma associated with the University of Al-Madinah graduates being attached to Salafi-Wahhabism remains. The recent graduates shared how they had to overcome queries about Salafi-Wahhabism during job interviews for positions in Singapore mosques. They were asked whether they would conduct prayers in accordance with Salafi-Wahhabism if appointed as an imam of the mosque. In the same vein, a graduate who became an imam at a local mosque was often asked by congregants whether he is a genuine Madinah graduate given his acceptance of local practices (Interview with Ahmad Yusuf, 2018). Some of the students felt that public officers had not given them enough attention compared to the treatment for Al-Azhar University

students. They complained that Muis officials did not visit them regularly and that they were often overlooked when the Minister-in-charge of Muslim affairs visited the Middle East. Yet, Muis seems to have remedied this situation when they positioned a Student Liaison Officer (SLO) to oversee students in Saudi Arabia and Jordan. By contrast, one SLO is appointed to oversee the students in Egypt.

Graduates did not complain about the living and education conditions in Saudi Arabia. Students were required to attend classes, and the graduates shared that they were forced to focus on their studies. Attendance in class was not only compulsory, the students were dedicated specific seats in class, to the extent that students are unable to skip classes as they will be noticed. Moreover, students were provided with accommodation and allowance so that they were not required to do part-time work to support their education. A former student who studied there claimed that he was given SDR 800 per month for his studies (Interview with Syarif Ahmad, 2019). In Saudi Arabia, the opportunity for part-time work is good, because it is the centre for Haj pilgrims, and Singapore pilgrims can patronize their services to bring them around Islam's holiest cities and shrines. Yet, this is illegal for Singapore students. The fact that students without prior madrasah education are eligible for enrolment is indeed a major pull factor even for matured students who had decided to pursue religious studies.

We observed that compared to graduates from the other universities, the majority of the Islamic University of Madinah graduates were more focused on becoming religious teachers, even though some eventually ventured into business. One plausible reason was that they made the switch to religious studies on their own accord, and this was done at a later stage of their educational journey.

Malaysia and Islamization of Knowledge Discourse

The country that houses the greatest number of Singapore Islamic studies graduates outside the Middle East today is

Malaysia. Historically, Singapore was part of Malaya (Malay Peninsula) before achieving independence in 1965. There were thus many students who studied at the madrasahs or religious schools across both sides of the causeway. While there were not many university graduates then, students seeking higher education in Islamic studies would choose Al-Azhar University given its history and prestige. After the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM) was built in the 1980s, it became an alternative destination for Singapore madrasah students. The university, however, is not the first institution in the country to offer Islamic studies degrees. Before IIUM, the UM (University of Malaya) and UKM (National University of Malaysia) also housed departments and faculties offering Islamic studies. For example, UM hosts the Islamic Studies Academy (API) which has seen a number of Singaporean graduates. Similarly, many also graduated from UKM. Today, IIUM is the most popular choice for Singapore's religious studies students. The university's proximity to Singapore and more affordable cost of education are perhaps major factors that influenced parental preference to send their children there instead of the Middle East. Some of the graduates shared that they preferred studying in Malaysia because they could remain close to their family in Singapore. A number of those we interviewed said that they returned to Singapore almost every weekend or had their family members regularly visit them in Kuala Lumpur while studying there. As a respondent conveyed: "Many of them [graduates] pursued their Masters in Malaysia because, number one, it's near, it's very near. And many students whom I met also will come back over the weekend. Hari Raya they can spend time with their family" (Interview with Farhan Ahmad, 2019). Apart from this, respondents also shared that political stability of the country and region also influenced their choice of studying in Malaysia. Language and cultural similarities also feature strongly in the motivations of respondents, apart from ease of adapting and integrating into the campuses and the larger predominantly Malay/Muslim society.

In addition, IIUM's medium of instruction is English and for some modules, Arabic. As Singapore madrasah students were exposed to these languages in madrasah, they had no problems adjusting to teaching and learning. Furthermore, the university allows students to major in Islamic studies and minor in another non-religious subject including philosophy, political science and any other social science disciplines. The availability of this option is yet another factor that has drawn students to this institution. Many believed that such a curriculum offering opens doors for them to secure more diverse job opportunities.

Another major attraction for Singapore students to enrol into Malaysian universities for religious studies is that most of them are proud of its educational philosophy based on the Islamization of knowledge paradigm. The concept was popularized during the height of the Islamic resurgence in the 1980s. It essentially spells out that modern knowledge, the product of the West, is infused with western philosophy and values that are deemed secular and which have to be revised using "Islamic" perspective. The agenda that began even earlier in Pakistani universities is part of the resurgence trend against science and secularism in the name of Islam. Though prominent scholars have dismissed this project as utopian (Shaharuddin 2005), and pointed out that it has failed to make any significant contributions to scientific knowledge needed by society, it continues to be supported and institutionalized in Malaysian universities and remain an attraction for students. While the project was founded elsewhere, it remains closely associated in the Malay world with the ideas expounded by Professor Syed Naquib Al-Attas, who sought to "de-westernize" knowledge and questioned secular principles underlying modern subjects, such as economics, finance, politics, and sociology. Al-Attas' publication, *Islam and Secularism* (1993), which embodies this perspective has wide appeal amongst resurgence groups in Malaysia and Singapore. He also played a strong part in the establishment of IIUM, particularly one of its colleges, ISTAC (International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization).

An IIUM graduate, Syafiq, relates how Al-Attas and Islamization of knowledge penetrated the university's curriculum, although

students might not fully understand the concept. According to Syafiq,

> When we were in the university, we see Islamization as the core principle or one of the cardinal principles, I would say, for an IIUM student. Because we believe that we have to seek the best of both worlds. But later when we graduated, I realized that there are many interpretations of Islamization itself, and one that we understood was by a particular person, who is Naquib Al-Attas. And then there was Kamal Hassan, and Ismail Faruqi. And there are many other scholars who tried to somewhat bring their understanding or interpretation of customization of knowledge (Interview with Syafiq, 2019).

In the eyes of prospective students, the IIUM administration is efficient compared to the universities in the Arab world. The university manages the students' records, transcripts, and enrolment in an orderly and systematic fashion. The graduates claimed that they were at ease when they enrolled in Malaysian universities because they were familiar with the system. Some Singapore students also enrolled into Masters programmes because the universities were open to accept them, including those who had completed their first degrees in Middle East universities.

Nevertheless, the students shared that they struggled with three languages Malay, Arabic, and English and often one had to be given up. One graduate shared that on Islamic subjects, the lessons were conducted in Arabic, while the non-religious subjects in English. It has to be emphasized that the national and working language in Malaysia is Malay. Singapore graduates revealed that often, the standard of their English is compromised in the university's trilingual environment. Still, there is little evidence to suggest that the graduates are able to communicate their thoughts in Arabic beyond conversations and short speeches. Rarely do graduates engage with the broader Islamic scholarly community in Arabic or contribute in writing and publications in the language. Their audience remain the Malay-speaking ones, and the majority would end up writing and conversing in the Malay language.

Apart from IIUM, there were also Singapore's Islamic studies graduates from UM and UKM. The two universities have become less popular for madrasah students after the establishment of IIUM. The medium of instruction for Islamic studies in these universities is Malay and Arabic. Very few students graduated from UM and UKM, and they complained that they did not garner attention from Muis or the Malay elites. Graduates from UM majored mainly in sharia, economics, dakwah and human development even though we also interviewed some who specialized in Arabic language and theology. UM is not an Islamic university but hosts a faculty of Islamic studies. Thus, these graduates had many opportunities to mingle with Singapore students from other faculties. There are even fewer students studying Islamic studies in UKM, and most read theology and Islamic jurisprudence. A number of Madrasah Wak Tanjong graduates are enrolled in Islamic studies in UKM, though the university is less popular among the current batch of madrasah students.

IIUM's closest rival is the Islamic Science University of Malaysia (USIM). The number of Singapore students enrolling at this university is not clear, but the curriculum is structured similarly to IIUM. Instead of the Islamization of knowledge, the university applies the "integration of knowledge" paradigm, with the curriculum designed to place emphasis on multimedia and digitization. The graduates pride themselves for being exposed to *aqli* (reason) and *naqli* (revealed). The university has been active in its recruitment exercise and even extended its drive to attract Singapore madrasah students. Respondents revealed that USIM is a popular destination for Madrasah Alsagoff students in particular. Some of these students preferred USIM to other universities because the mode of assessment is similar to that of the madrasah: they were required to complete term assignments, undertake project work and class presentations. The location of the campus is also a factor that attracted the graduates: being located in Nilai (Negeri Sembilan), USIM campus is away from the city centre but closer to Singapore.

The programmes offered by Malaysian Islamic universities and institutions are attractive and based on our fieldwork, the

graduates seemed to have a higher chance of employment in the private sector in administration, research, and translation areas. Generally, graduates do not aspire to become religious teachers as the rigour of their Islamic education is deemed not to be on par with others such as Al-Azhar University.

Indonesia: The Bastion of Liberal Islam?

Based on our survey responses and interviews, not many Singaporeans have graduated from Indonesian Islamic universities. Two of the largest state universities are UIN Syarif Hidayatullah (Jakarta) and UIN Sunan Kalijaga (Jogyakarta). Muis is also unable to provide exact figures of the students currently studying there but estimates it to be between 30 and 40 students. These figures may be overstated as it may include those embarking on pre-university programmes in madrasah or traditional Islamic schools. We managed to interview a few asatizah who had previously studied in one of Indonesia's boarding schools called *pondok* or *pesantren*. One of the popular pesantren is Gontor, which has produced influential Islamic thinkers and intellectuals. An *ustaz* who was trained in Gontor, shared his religious training experience there. His response revealed that Indonesian students tend to perform better than students from Singapore when they were studying in Al-Azhar University. According to him, their training was rigorous in its focus on mastering Islamic traditions. The ustaz considered his pesantren training similar to how Singapore national servicemen are trained. The routine instilled discipline with strong emphasis on a good grasp of the Arabic language. He shared that during his time in Gontor, there was a "language court" to try students caught for not conversing in Arabic. Punishments were meted out for not abiding the language ruling such as balding the student and suspension from school. Students were also given opportunities to lead. In their final year, every student was given an administrative role in managing the school. Those who graduated from the pesantren were easily accepted into many Middle Eastern universities including Al-Azhar University.

While in Gontor, the ustaz was exposed to the writings of numerous progressive Indonesian thinkers such as Amin Abdullah and Syafii Maarif. In fact, Syafii Maarif's writings on intra-faith unity between Sunnis and Shias left an imprint on his religious thought. He explained that Singapore graduates are not exposed to such writings because the scholar is considered "liberal", a negative connotation referring to a religious scholar not following Islamic tradition. Other progressive scholars he was exposed to included Fazlur Rahman (based in Chicago University before he passed on) and Nurcholish Madjid (Indonesian scholar who studied under Fazlur Rahman). The works that the Gontor graduate cited reveal that some Indonesian pesantren not only exposed their students to good classical and Middle Eastern scholarships, but also local and western ones as well.

Unfortunately, Indonesian Islam, which was once described as the "smiling face of Islam", now suffers from many inaccurate assessments. On the one hand, Singapore's religious elites consider Indonesian scholars to be promoting "liberal" Islam. The liberal label raises sceptics among stakeholders about how Islam is taught in Indonesian universities. On the other hand, the media tend to play up another worry that Indonesian Islam is moving to the right of the political spectrum. While conservative elements are on the rise within society, as reflected in many incidences related to terrorism, mass protests (for example, the "212" protests in 2017 that eventually brought down Chinese-Christian governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama or Ahok) and the rise of initiatives such as Sharia banking and halal tourism, more dynamic and progressive teachings remain underexplored at least in state level universities. Students are exposed to social sciences and humanities, and some of the universities also establish centres for inter-faith and intra-faith dialogues. Claims that the academics are liberal and promoting deviant Islam are also unqualified as many were trained in the Middle East in institutions such as Al-Azhar University. Yet, they are able to adapt their educational experience to Indonesia's multi-religious context.

Lesser-known Routes

The four countries discussed above remain dominant educational destinations for Singapore's Islamic studies graduates. However, we also interviewed graduates from lesser-known universities in order to compare their experiences, challenges, and educational outcomes. These countries include Iran, Kuwait, Libya, Syria, and Qatar. Given the small sample size for each country, we could not make any generalization regarding the quality of Islamic education provided by these countries. Yet, they provide preliminary data for further explorations on their merits for prospective students.

The reasons why graduates ended up in these universities differed from one case to another. For some it was to try out something new; for others it was because they were recommended by alumni or specific organizations. Availability of scholarships was yet another major factor. For example, most of the graduates who studied in Kuwait went there because of the scholarship offered by the university. The universities in the oil rich state were willing to sponsor madrasah students from a very young age of eight to ten years old.

We also encountered a graduate, Abdul Amin, who completed his degree in Tripoli. The reason for studying there was by chance. He was planning to go to Al-Azhar University after completing his madrasah education at Madrasah Aljunied, but he decided to apply for the Islamic College in Tripoli after a senior religious teacher recommended him to do so. He decided to attend the college in Tripoli because he received full funding (Interview with Abdul Amin, 2019). The plus point about studying in the college is that he was able to learn the Arabic language better. He was, however, not the first Singaporean to study in the college.

One graduate who studied in Qatar attended the Hamad Bin Khalifa University, which was previously known as the Qatar Faculty of Islamic studies. He completed his MA degree there after completing his BA at IIUM. When asked about the ideological leaning of Qatar universities, he shared that the influence of

Islamist ideologue Yusuf Al-Qaradawi remains strong in the country, though not at the department he studied in (Interview with Syafiq, 2019). Religious discourse in the Gulf remains Middle East centred, and there is little interest in Southeast Asia.

Given the small Shia community in Singapore, there were not many graduates from this sect. We were, however, able to interview one prominent graduate from the theological seminary in Qom, the holy city for Shias in Iran (Interview with Junaidi, 2020). He felt the need to study there in order to be able to teach a small group of Shia Muslims in Singapore. The graduate did not study at any of the Singapore madrasahs, but was able to obtain full scholarship to study in Iran in the 1990s. Apart from him, only his son is studying there, but he met many Indonesians and Malaysians during the course of his studies. While Shias continue to be discriminated by certain groups of religious elites in Singapore, he had no problems being granted the ARS certificate.

A number of students in Syria had their studies disrupted because of the war. The system in Syria mirrors that of Yemen, where students stayed in boarding schools or madrasahs. Because religious learning there is mostly based on informal systems, accreditation is based on the traditional path of receiving *ijazah* and not necessarily through official certification. A female student who enrolled into one of the colleges there shared that she chose Syria in order to avoid Egypt, as many of her friends were in Al-Azhar (Interview with Husna, 2018). She recollected that before the war, there were about fifty Singapore students studying in Syria. She was pursuing a diploma at Syeikh Ahmed Kuftaro Institution. Some of those we interviewed were pursuing diploma in jurisprudence, while others, Master's degrees. Another source claimed that before the war, there were about eighty Singaporean students there (Interview with Aminah, 2019). In Syria, Singaporeans enrolled in Jami' Al-Fath (Interview with Husna, 2018) or Al-Fath University (Interview with Aminah, 2019). Some of the students were trapped in Syria when the war started, until they were advised by the Singapore Ministry of

Foreign Affairs and Muis to return. Aminah, who enrolled into a diploma programme there since 2008 until the war, shared some of her hardship:

> What made me change my mind [to return to Singapore] was that I was on my way to school when I saw huge tanks. There were soldiers [manning them] and they kept stopping us at every traffic light where I had to unwind the window and show my student pass. Back then we don't have a student pass. We had been surviving on tourist visa (Interview with Aminah, 2018).

Students were also traumatized by what they saw in war-torn Syria. Aminah added,

> So on the way to the airport was another scary thing because we almost missed our flight. There was so many buses and vehicles that were overturned along the way to the airport that we had to take a very long route and I almost missed my flight. I was so scared (Interview with Aminah, 2018).

Common Challenges Facing Islamic Studies Graduates

Depending on where the graduates studied for their degree, they faced different trials and benefits. Our interviews and surveys demonstrate that their challenges varied from place to place and from period to period. However, there are common challenges which the graduates faced immediately after their graduation. These included limited career opportunities and public perceptions towards them.

One of the major issues discussed with the participants was career options available to them. This issue will be discussed at greater length in the next chapter when we deal with the undergraduates. For now, surmise for us to conclude that career prospects for the graduates in the past were better as compared to the current undergraduates. About 41.7 per cent of the graduates we surveyed shared they were clear about their career options after graduation, and 81.1 per cent were satisfied with the education

they received for their Bachelor's degree. In the past, graduates undertook courses in Islamic studies because they wanted to become religious teachers (in madrasahs and as freelancers). Some had always wanted to be religious functionaries: to serve in the Sharia Court, Muis fatwa committee, or institutions such as Muis and Pergas. They did not claim to be experts in both worldly and other worldly knowledge, unlike the undergraduates today. The lack of opportunities for the graduates in non-religious fields was also shared by a COFA member, who said that graduates needed to upskill in order to be attractive to employers (Kuchit 2020, p. 8).

However, some of the graduates shared that the madrasahs could have played their part in guiding them in their university choices or courses better. They were also not well informed of what to expect for university life, especially in the Middle East. Career guidance in madrasahs could be improved. Only 53.5 per cent said they are satisfied with madrasah career guidance.[13] For the earlier batches, some of the skills they felt could have been obtained include interpersonal skills, office management skills, training in organizational and presentation skills, and communication skills. A graduate admitted that opportunities in the religious sector is decreasing every year. The view of Farhan Ahmad, who graduated from Al-Azhar in 2001, is by no means an isolated one,

> In Singapore, we are Muslim minority, we are very few. We are about 600,000 people, not even a million. Opportunities are very limited, especially today compared to 20 years ago because today, you know every year how many madrasah students…During my time or even before, one year we have only about 10 graduates and during that time, we have places for them to go. Right now there are so many students, and when they come back, they have no jobs. They don't get opportunities.

One issue that was constantly raised during the face-to-face interviews is the salary of the graduates. Majority of the graduates we interviewed complained that their salary is low compared to graduates from non-religious sectors. To work at the mosque,

their pay might be as low as $1,500 (before CPF cuts, or workers' compulsory savings scheme). About 38.6 per cent of the respondents surveyed shared that their gross monthly income ranges from $1,501 to $2,500, and 33.9 per cent shared that it is lower than $1,500. About 13.4 per cent shared that their income ranges from $2,501 to $3,000. This means that their pay is, on average, similar to a diploma holder from the polytechnics. Their low salary has forced them to undertake additional part-time jobs as freelancers. Those who attained a Diploma in Islamic Studies shared that their starting pay in a mosque is $1,200 prior to CPF contribution. With a take-home pay of about $900, they can barely survive (Interview with Husna, 2018). We observed that the graduates frequently switched jobs, hopping from one mosque to another. Many of the graduates shared that their dream job is a position in the government sector or public agencies. However, most of them ended up with Muis, and the opportunities here are limited to an administrative position in the office of mufti, Muis academy or teaching in Muis' weekend madrasah classes. Even so, these departments are filled with those from non-madrasah background more equipped with administrative skills.

When asked for the names of their contemporaries who are absorbed into the civil service, they can hardly think of anyone, with the exception of those who ended up in research institutes studying security issues or assisting researchers in research projects. Islamic studies graduates are now part of the gig economy. They work in mosques, madrasahs, but also teach religion from house to house, or give sermons in mosques. The issue is whether the number of mosques can accommodate that many graduates, given that the supply pool of the graduates increase every year. The only buffer for many is conducting private classes.

As the graduates are pushed further into the gig economy than in the past, recent graduates struggle as they have yet to make a name for themselves while their seniors have established themselves in the market. Regionally, they find it even more difficult to find a niche because Malaysia and Indonesia have a pool of graduates absorbed into the religious bureaucracy, and some of them have made their names in Singapore by being invited to teach and give

sermons here. Some of these Malaysian preachers include the late Ismail Kamus, the late Haron Din, Badli Shah Alauddin, Sharifah Hayati Syed Ismail, and Kazim Elias. Thus, new graduates find it difficult to penetrate the already saturated asatizah market. The COVID-19 pandemic which hit the world in January 2020 has exacerbated some of these problems as Islamic studies graduates have also been badly hit. Now they are competing not only with fellow Malaysian and Indonesian preachers for online space, but also global preachers such as Ismail Menk, Zakir Naik, Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, and Hamza Yusuf.

There are also structural barriers for Islamic studies graduates and these impediments affect male and female graduates differently. For the male graduates, some shared that they were not called up for the compulsory military national service (two to three years of compulsory conscription into the military, police or civil defence for males between 18 and 24 years old), and this significantly impacted their pay grade. Those liable to be called up are the ones who had completed their post-secondary education. Eighty-seven per cent of the male respondents said they were not called up for national service. When asked for the reasons why, their responses varied: they were exempted or deferred for pursuing studies overseas, but were not called up since completion. Without the national service experience, it is unclear whether they can be employed in the government sectors. Even if so, their pay will be lower than those who had served national service. We asked the respondents to name their friends who are employed in these sectors but most could not name anyone except those in Muis. Moreover, missing out on the national service experience does not affect only their pay, but also the overall common experience shared with other Singaporean youths as well as the values of loyalty to the country, integrity, unity, and discipline. Some even mentioned that they consciously called the relevant bodies asking why they were not called up but were told that they were exempted.

Females are not called up for the mandatory national service as a matter of policy. Yet, the nature of the religious sector in Singapore limits job opportunities for female asatizah graduates.

Female graduates cannot lead prayers in the mosque, or deliver Friday sermons, which provide additional sources of income for the male graduates. They also rarely conduct sermons after major prayers and congregation during the fasting month of Ramadhan, which remains to be the domain of men. They struggle to find their own niche in teaching female clients.

Our interviews with the graduates revealed that there are areas in which they do not look into, even though this may be an alternative job avenue for them. One area which is lacking is the discursive element in the form of critical engagement, as well as writing and publishing. One of the factors why they do not move into these areas is that they do not have time. Moreover, these sectors are not profitable and do not generate income. Additionally, they are not trained to write critically during the course of their studies but mainly regurgitate content which explains why recent graduates face difficulties entering the job market already dominated by senior graduates. The graduates also have to manoeuvre in a religious community that pivots towards ritualistic and spiritualistic orientations rather than critical thinking. These demand different skillsets: oratorical skills, singing abilities (especially when reciting Quranic verses during prayers), and charisma. Some graduates shared that among the questions asked during job interviews in mosques is whether the person can sing well and recite the Quran melodically, demonstrating the demands of the religious market. We also noticed that those who are able to meet the spiritual needs of the audience are the ones able to penetrate the religious market effectively. One graduate is able to penetrate the Malaysian market because of his strong skills in reciting the Quran melodically during prayers apart from his connections with Malaysian members of royalty. But, drawing lessons from neighbouring Indonesia and Malaysia, those who tended to do better in this spiritual market need not necessarily have any training in religious studies.

Considering the prospect for employability, religious authorities are pushing graduates to consider areas such as counselling and social work. The state's view is consistent with its calling for asatizah to tackle the community's radical and extreme ideas,

which it sees as having roots in misguided theology. Increasingly, politicians also contend that religious solutions are necessary in tackling social problems. Campaigns such as "Dadah itu Haram" (Drugs are forbidden) give the idea that Islamic teachings provide remedies for drug abuses even though there are other variables that contribute to such social phenomena. This explains why graduates tend to enrol in MA programmes on security and terrorism. Muis, too, is encouraging recent graduates to take up courses in counselling. These courses require resources from the community, when the decision to enrol into these fields could have been done before they stepped into an Islamic university. Moreover, training a professional requires at least four years, plus additional years of post-graduate training before being given the proper accreditation. For instance, for an Islamic studies graduate to be on par with a locally trained social worker from the National University of Singapore (NUS), he must undergo the same number of years of training.

Developing Islamic Graduates From Within: Part-time Courses in Singapore

In Singapore, part-time undergraduate learning is gaining support from the community, particularly as it means those who had not graduated from the madrasahs can still study theology, and eventually succeed to become Islamic religious teachers. We had the opportunity to interview founders and teachers from the Al-Zuhri Institute which offers part-time courses in partnership with overseas Islamic universities. For undergraduate programmes, the Institute partners with the Ibn Khaldun University in Bogor (West Java), while for its graduate programme, it has established a tie-up with CASIS (Centre for Advance Studies on Islam, Science and Civilisation) in Malaysia. As of 2020, two batches of students have graduated from the four-year undergraduate programme. Currently twelve candidates are completing their graduate studies.

The choice of these universities depends on existing networks. Our respondents admitted that they had always wanted to work

with a university in Indonesia but chose Ibn Khaldun because of their contacts there. Ibn Khaldun is also a private university and hence Al-Zuhri believes that there is greater flexibility to work out arrangements with it. Though Indonesia has a number of notable universities such as the Indonesian State Islamic Universities (UIN), two of the largest based in Jakarta and Jogjakarta, they are not considered for potential partnership. The reason for choosing CASIS is because of the admiration for Syed Naquib Al-Attas' scholarship. Although he is no longer actively lecturing, one of the respondents shared that he continues to have "clout". CASIS is now identified with Al-Attas' student Wan Mohd Nor.

Al-Zuhri is committed to developing courses based on the local context. The institute's representatives contend that they are doing the Malay/Muslim community in Singapore a service by equipping local Singaporeans with religious knowledge, especially those who have not been to the madrasah. They worry about the Middle Eastern bias of religious studies and feel Al-Zuhri can address this lacuna. One respondent suggested that the students studying overseas will come back with foreign exposure, and there will be a gap in terms of their thinking with the rest of society: the way they speak, the ideas they promote, and their relevance. If graduates are trained locally, they will, he asserted, better understand the challenges of the society and the country. Reflecting on the Middle East graduates, the respondent opined:

> ... one or two graduates in Singapore, when they came back from Madinah [Islamic University of Madinah], they are very traditional, *ini tak boleh, ini tak boleh* [the act of anti-innovations]. Over time, they mellowed. And they know about the Singapore situation and they adapt themselves to Singapore's multi-racial tolerance... When graduates from Al-Azhar or Madinah or Jordan come back [to Singapore], are they able to communicate effectively? They can't. Because the terms, the notion, the aspiration are of different tiers... That's when we need to bridge [them]. [To] bridge in such a way that they can come together, they can speak in ways that they are comfortable with, and build upon each other's experiences, aspirations and so on. That's not happening. This will continue indefinitely if the present set-up remains.

The issue is whether Muis recognizes those who graduated from part-time programmes as asatizah. Al-Zuhri's representatives contend that its graduates from Ibn Khaldun University can teach religion at the lower levels (until secondary 4) but would require to learn Arabic if they want to teach at a higher level. Still, Muis will only allow them to be recognized as second tier asatizah, which only allows them to teach basic religion or Quran reading. However, they will be given the title "Ustaz" or "Ustazah" which means the community will not be able to distinguish them from the graduates who qualify for Tier 1. In reality, those from Tier 1 and Tier 2 are competing for the same audience—Quran reading and basic religion. But the respondent shared that not everyone who enrolled into the course wants to be an asatizah, some are interested to deepen their Islamic knowledge. Still, without proper measures, graduates from these part-time courses expand the supply of asatizah in the already saturated job market.

Conclusion: Regulating Islamic Studies Graduates

In the last decade, Muis has led the drive to regulate the asatizah sector. The reasons for this regulation are not clearly defined, except for the need to weed out extreme voices. The move to regulate the sector also means ensuring only qualified individuals can preach to the community. However, any move to regulate the sector, in the name of professionalizing it, will be futile if there is no proper diagnosis of the curriculum offered by Islamic universities discussed. While regulating the sector may also facilitate planning the supply of graduates deemed ideal, this has not been raised in public discourse.

Our survey and face-to-face interviews reveal that the majority of the existing pool of graduates received their BA degree from Al-Azhar University. This will likely change in the years to come as more graduates from Jordan and Malaysia universities return home. However, not all of the current graduates are registered in the ARS. We estimate that there are between 4,000 and 5,000 asatizah recognized under the scheme, inclusive of non-graduates

as well. In fact, majority of them do not have any degree. We encountered some who completed the GCE A level examination at the madrasah and graduated from the National University of Singapore (NUS) recognized in the scheme. It is unclear if similar cases in the future will likely be accepted into the pool as recognition will only be given to students who have obtained Islamic studies degrees. This also raises the question of whether graduates via distant-learning programmes can qualify as religious teachers.

However, institutions offering these part-time, long distance learning degrees do not share this practice of recognizing only those with full-time degree in Islamic studies. These institutions which include Pergas and Andalus have arrangements with Malaysian institutions and are constantly increasing the pool of supply for asatizah. While the students may not necessarily come from a madrasah background, they enrol into these part-time programmes which are run and managed by Malaysian universities in partnership with their Singapore-based counterparts. These students graduate with degrees acknowledged by IIUM, which means they can qualify under the ARS scheme. One notable impact of this scheme is that the supply of the religious teachers will increase and the initial plan of capping madrasah enrolment at 400 per cohort in view of prospect for employability will be disrupted.

Regulation alone will not solve the manpower planning of Islamic studies graduates. Parents' and graduates' expectations have to be managed and corrected. Some of the respondents argue that with their Islamic studies degree from a Middle East university or the region, they can then venture into other fields such as counselling, education, and research.[14] The message from Muis, Pergas and the political elites also contributes to this impression: that an asatizah can manage both the secular and the religious sciences sectors. However, the reality paints a different picture. Some of the graduates we interviewed realized the difficulties in getting jobs outside the religious sector only after they have graduated. Unfortunately, as will be discussed in the next chapter, some undergraduates continue to harbour the intention of venturing

into jobs outside the religious sector, without understanding the limitations of their qualifications and the community's resources pumped to sustain the madrasah sector. This only proves that the message they have obtained from the authorities, as well as the Malay media, is misleading.

NOTES

1. One example is Mufti Dr Nazirudin Mohd Nasir, who completed his primary and secondary education at one of the national schools before switching to the madrasah system.
2. See Abdel Maqsud Elsayed Elsayed, http://ibnyahya.com/2011/abdel-maqsud-elsayed-elsayed/, 29 March 2013.
3. In Singapore's education system, a junior college is a two-year programme leading up to GCE A Level certificate, which will allow graduates to enter the university. This is a pre-university programme. Some will opt to enter one of the polytechnics (three-year diploma course) and ITE (Institute of Technical Education) which basically equips students with skills for the workforce.
4. This will be discussed further in the following chapter when we deal with the undergraduates' learning experience.
5. One of the students shared that she even took some courses organized by Malaysian students and learnt under the late Haron Din, one of the spiritual guides of the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS), who also specializes in Islamic healing. The reason why the student was attracted to Haron's ideas was because she experienced "disturbances" from spirits. Thus, rather than focusing on puritanical ideas and their impact on Singapore students, one should also focus on other concerns as well, such as the approach towards knowledge, science and rational Islamic thinking.
6. Before the Islamic resurgence, it is common for men and women from the opposite gender to shake hands even though they are not related by any family ties.
7. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic which hit Egypt in 2020 also resulted in similar uncertainties for the students. Resulting from a massive lockdown imposed by the Egyptian government, the students were left stranded in the city until a specially arranged flight was sent to bring them home.
8. The same cannot be said about Malaysian students.

9. In a way, Al-Azhar University too offers disciplines beyond theology and Islamic studies, but Singapore students choose to do only Islamic studies there.
10. The group was founded by an African religious leader based in Beirut.
11. Some notable Malaysians who graduated from Jordan universities include Perlis Mufti Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin and former Education Minister Maszlee Malik.
12. The graduate enrolled into Al-Azhar University after graduating from Al-Madinah University but did not complete the course.
13. Here, we are referring to feedback from the cohort before 2010. Now, there is greater assistance from Muis to support the madrasahs on career guidance, and our data based on the interviews with undergraduates show that there is indeed marked improvement.
14. No data is available as to which sectors outside the religious sector that Islamic studies graduates have ventured into. While some have gone into research, they are mainly on short-term contracts, if not focusing on issues related to security and Islamic studies.

4

CURRENT ISLAMIC STUDIES UNDERGRADUATES: NAVIGATING UNCHARTED PATHWAYS

Based on responses from survey questionnaires and in-depth interviews with graduates as far back as the 1960s, the previous chapter highlighted major factors conditioning their pursuance of Islamic studies in selected educational institutions abroad, the types of religious education received, their learning experiences as well as the major challenges they encountered upon their return. This chapter seeks to examine the extent to which these findings remain relevant to current religious studies undergraduates. Data was drawn from survey responses and focus group discussions with students from a diversity of religious institutions in neighbouring countries (Malaysia in particular) and the Middle East conducted between August 2017 and January 2020. Attention was given to their (a) motivations for pursuing religious studies in their universities of choice, (b) the modes of teaching and learning religion, (c) their interaction and relations with students and lecturers within

and beyond the campuses, (d) the extent of support they received from relevant stakeholders in their educational journey and the challenges they are facing, and (e) their concerns regarding their future employment prospects. Generally, responses reveal that the Islamic studies landscape and its impact have generally remained unchanged over the decades.

Since 2000, amid growing concerns with the rise of religious radicalism in the Muslim world and the region, Islamic studies graduates as well as those currently studying abroad have been the focus of much national and community attention. Reports in the media consistently highlight efforts by Malay/Muslim politicians engaging current Islamic studies undergraduates and impressing upon them the imperative of contextualizing knowledge to the context of Singapore's diverse and pluralistic society. Contextualizing Islamic knowledge underscores one of the main objectives of the PCICS (Postgraduate Certificate in Islam in Contemporary Societies). Introduced in April 2020 and mandated on all returning Islamic studies graduates who seek to teach religion in the country, the certification programme for fresh Islamic studies graduates is "designed to equip students with deep familiarity with the current and future contexts of Singapore society, Islam and Muslim communities in the Southeast Asian/Nusantara region".[1] A committee to gather feedback and make recommendations to professionalize *asatizah* generally referred to as COFA (Committee of Future Asatizah) was also been formed under the leadership of Senior Minister of State Dr Mohamad Maliki Osman.

While articulations on the pertinent role of asatizah to the security and well-being of community and country persist in official discourse, the learning culture, orientations and the environment, both formally and informally, of the selected universities they are enrolled in and factors influencing their choice of study and reasons for their selection of these institutions, which have direct implications on their religious outlook and employment prospects, are hardly addressed openly. The data obtained from our discussions and survey responses are intended to focus on these issues. They indicate the extent to which Islamic studies undergraduates are

equipped with the necessary skills emphasized in discourse on progress in contemporary education and the relevance of the concerns of our elites in their ability to shape Islam to adapt to Singapore's multicultural and multi-religious context.

In total, there are presently about 720 undergraduates spread across the Middle East and Southeast Asia mainly in Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei. Of these, 108 undergraduates from the various institutions of higher learning in these countries responded to the online survey. This was followed-up by focus group discussions with 140 students from universities in Egypt, Jordan and Malaysia.[2] The majority of the respondents to the survey are females (59 per cent) between the ages of 18 and 24 years old (82 per cent). About 79.6 per cent are undertaking their BA, while a small proportion of 9.3 per cent are graduate students. The remaining are pursuing undergraduate diplomas leading to a degree. A quarter of the respondents are currently studying in various universities in Egypt with the majority enrolled in Al-Azhar University and another quarter in various universities in Malaysia. The students in Jordan were more forthcoming in participating in the surveys, making up 36 per cent of the respondents (27 per cent from YU). The high number of participations from the Jordanian universities may not be proportional to the exact numbers of current student population from Singapore, which makes up only 20 per cent. However, capturing the sentiments of students studying there is important given the current strong urgings by the community leaders for students to study in Jordan. There is a strong likelihood that they will outnumber those going to Egypt and Malaysia in the near future. To make up for this sampling imbalance, we had longer and more focus group discussions with students from Egypt, with the participation from 29 Al-Azhar students. We also tried to obtain a balanced representation of students from the different levels and their major fields of study. Of the respondents, 31.5 per cent are first year students, 29.6 per cent, and 21.3 per cent in their second and third years respectively. The majority of the respondents are majoring in Islamic jurisprudence (28.7 per cent), followed by theology or *usuluddin* (24.1 per cent), Arabic language

and literature (17.6 per cent), and Quran/Hadith (9.3 per cent). A minority are undertaking Islamic banking and social sciences. About 40 per cent of the respondents minor in another subject, with theology being the most popular minor specialization.

Motivations for Pursuing Religious Studies

Generally, today's religious studies students are relatively better-off socio-economically compared to their seniors decades ago and do not face as much hardship in completing their studies. On average, students complete their BA degree within five years. Most seemed to come from the lower middle-class families but find education abroad more affordable than the earlier generations. In terms of their socio-economic profile, about 25 per cent of the respondents are from families with a total household income of between $1,501 and $2,500, 15.7 per cent between $2,501 and $3,000, and 13.0 per cent between $3,001 and $3,999. Furthermore, 71.3 per cent of those surveyed have siblings currently studying or have studied in a full-time madrasah which indicate that they know what to expect from the system. Responses suggest that socio-economic background is not the primary determinant for students pursuing religious studies unlike in the past when it was associated with dropouts from the mainstream education system.[3] However, it has some relevance in determining where students choose to pursue their degree. Data from the focus group discussions with Al-Azhar students that will be discussed shortly do reveal that some parents prefer their children to study in Malaysian universities because it costs less compared to those in the Middle East.

Al-Azhar University remains the most popular choice for the majority of those from madrasah despite the fact that they have been persuaded to consider Jordanian universities instead by policymakers and senior asatizah.[4] Phrases such as "expect the worst" and "expect the unexpected" were commonly reiterated to deter them. Yet, they still chose Al-Azhar because their parents perceive it as the most ideal Islamic studies institution that has for generations produced Islamic scholars or *ulama*. Their madrasah teachers are also a strong factor of influence. Furthermore, the

lack of familiarity with other universities in the Middle East and a sense of reassurance following the route taken by their seniors are also cited. Students interviewed during a focus group discussion conducted in Cairo in 2019 elaborated on the strong influence of their madrasah teachers on their choice of university. As a current year one female student highlighted: "I have huge respect for my madrasah teachers [in Madrasah Aljunied] who were from Al-Azhar University and thus chose to follow their footsteps." A postgraduate student, who almost enrolled in Al-Azhar University but switched to the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) at the very last minute shared how teachers in Madrasah Aljunied encouraged their students to go to Al-Azhar. In his words,

> At first, I wanted to pursue my degree in Al-Azhar. Ever since I was young, it was Al-Azhar all the way. Because [Madrasah] Aljunied was always "pushing" [promoting] Al-Azhar ... 'Oh Azhar, Azhar, Azhar!' so we instinctively chose Al-Azhar without getting to know what courses Al-Azhar has to offer and all that. Yeah, previously if you come from Aljunied, you automatically go to Al-Azhar after that. If we want to pursue someplace else, we will be doubtful (*ragu-ragu*) ... But at the last minute, a few weeks before registering for Al-Azhar and submitting the documents, I tried researching other universities such as IIUM, UM, USIM and see what is best there (Interview with an IIUM MA student, 2018).

After coming to the ancient city, the undergraduates in Al-Azhar University revealed that they are able to adapt to studying there and expressed that the condition is not as unpleasant as expected.

But after being told repeatedly of the negativities associated with Al-Azhar University, some madrasah graduates now consider the universities in Jordan as alternatives. The policymakers also seem to encourage madrasah students to enrol in Jordan universities. Most of the current undergraduates studying in Amman (Jordan) are enrolled in the University of Jordan (UJ), which is located in the capital city of Amman. During our fieldwork, there are fifty-four students pursuing Islamic studies

and Arabic language in the university. The other universities in Amman such as the World Islamic Sciences and Education University (WISE) and Zarqa University (ZU) currently take in less than ten Singaporean students (pursuing Islamic studies) altogether. UJ admits only those with Islamic studies background into its Islamic studies courses, while WISE is more open to enrolling those without any religious studies qualification. Outside Amman, Singapore students are enrolled into Yarmouk University (YU) which is located in Irbid. There are 89 Singapore students studying in YU. The courses offered for religious studies mirror those offered by UJ, and the number of Singapore students currently enrolled in the two universities are similar. Most of the students we spoke to shared that they were the first few from Singapore pursuing a degree from Jordan universities. Their choice was not based on an assessment of the universities' curriculum, modes of learning, or intellectual environment, but hearsay. Some disclosed that they chose Jordan and not Cairo to pursue Islamic studies because they wanted to explore a different route compared to their seniors. According to Salman Amin, a student of UJ from 2015–19, "At that point of time [before enrolling into UJ], I didn't know much about UJ. I think six of my male friends from my batch in Madrasah Aljunied, they went to YU. So, it was a totally new environment which is what I wanted when I went to UJ" (Interview with Salman Amin, 2019).

Theology and jurisprudence remain popular disciplines among Singapore students. In UJ, students majoring in Islamic studies enrol in the Faculty of Sharia, which has three departments: Islamic jurisprudence, Islamic banking and finance, and foundations of religion. There are more Singaporeans in the department offering foundations of religion, followed by departments of jurisprudence, and Islamic banking and finance. A small number also major in Arabic language and literature, which is housed in a department under the Faculty of Arts. The reasons for why they choose to pursue Islamic religious studies reflect similar trend with students in the other universities in the Middle East. An anecdote from a current undergraduate in Jordan is worth highlighting: "When I was young, I had many friends from the national schools

[from the secular stream]. I feel that they need more exposure to religious knowledge. I need to do Islamic studies so that I can serve my community to increase religious awareness" (Focus group discussion with students from UJ, 2019). Students clearly assume that studying Islamic jurisprudence and theology will help to raise religious awareness which they found lacking among Muslim youths in the community.

After Cairo and Amman, Medina is now the third most popular destination for current Singapore students in the Middle East. As there are not many Singaporean female students studying in Saudi Arabian universities, all the respondents are males. Generally, responses obtained from the undergraduates on a number of issues reveal consistency with those shared by the graduates discussed in the previous chapter. The majority of the current students are enrolled in the Islamic University of Madinah (IUM). However, Singaporean students are also attending other universities in Saudi Arabia provinces such as the Umm Al-Qura in Mecca, Qassim University in Al-Qassim Region, and the University of Jeddah in Jeddah. The fields of study they are undertaking vary but there is a high concentration in sharia, hadith and Quran studies, Islamic economics, dakwah, *usuluddin* and Arabic language. IUM's faculty of sharia differs from Al-Azhar University or Jordan universities in its focus on the Hanbali school of jurisprudence. This school of law is not the dominant one in Singapore where the majority are adherents of the Shafie school. The university, however, claims that it is open to different schools of jurisprudence, though this is not practised in reality. Students are mostly exposed to strict Salafi tradition and the Hanbali school of thought. They are not exposed to competing perspectives within these as well as other schools of thought and tradition such as Shiism. The universities impose strict and regimental rules for compliance for students' attendance and conduct. The regimental methods of teaching in Saudi Arabian universities was highlighted by students which also led parents to enrol them in IUM so that they will be instilled with discipline (Focus group discussion with the Islamic University of Medina, 2018).

As discussed in the previous chapter, graduates in the university have been widely associated with Salafi-Wahhabism, a puritan ideology. Yet, current students denied that they are being indoctrinated by this ideology. They disclosed that materials and writings commonly associated with the puritan school are now being phased out from the syllabus, and students can have access to previously restricted books. A student during our focus group discussion with IUM undergraduates shared that the university believes in "Al-Tamazhub Bila Al-Ta'assub" (The subscription to a school of jurisprudence without dogmatism) (Focus group discussion with students from IUM, 2018). But the dominance of Salafi-Wahhabism is not the reason why Singapore students chose to study in Medina; rather they enrolled for pragmatic reasons. Responses reveal that most of the students who chose IUM were motivated by the availability of substantial scholarships offered by the university. The university is also open to accept students without madrasah background. Being in the heart of the holy lands, Mecca and Medina, was another relevant factor.

Malaysia universities host the second largest number of Singapore students after Egypt. Like their seniors, the majority of Singapore students who pursue religious education in Malaysia choose IIUM over other universities. There are many reasons for this: IIUM is considered one of the most prestigious Islamic university in the country; it offers religious and non-religious courses; it offers modules in English language that attracts international students; and it is the closest full-fledged Islamic university to Singapore. Courses taught in the university—such as comparative religion—are in English while the theological subjects are in Arabic. Moreover, some students are attracted to its modern facilities. A current MA student of *fiqh* from the university shared that the availability of sporting facilities attracted him to IIUM, apart from the curriculum it offers. According to him,

> For IIUM, I heard a lot of our seniors went there, especially the batch before us. The subjects are about the same, but I had the sudden urge to go to IIUM because of the facilities that are not

> made available in Egypt such as—and this is the most contributing factor—swimming pools. When I saw that IIUM offers swimming facilities, I started to contemplate and think twice about my decision (Interview with an MA student in IIUM, 2018).

The university generally accepts graduates from Singapore madrasahs. Its policy of accepting those not from religious schools, provided that they meet certain standards, is also perhaps another major factor for its popularity. Undergraduates who were from the polytechnics or JCs (Junior Colleges), and even those majoring in technology related fields, have been admitted into the religious studies programme. A case in point is a respondent from Nanyang Polytechnic who majored in space and interior design. She undertook a part-time course from Andalus (Diploma in Islamic studies) before being admitted into IIUM. The practice of admitting students from the non-madrasah stream is consistent with the university's collaboration in the form of twinning programmes with Singapore stakeholders that offer part-time joint degree programmes conducted in Singapore with lectures given by IIUM's faculty. As will be discussed shortly, these programmes accord students with academic qualifications recognized by some universities. Most of these students doing these part-time and offshore courses did not graduate from the local madrasah but emerged from the national schools. We also observe that the majority of Singaporeans studying in Malaysian campuses are females. This may be due to the fact that parents are reluctant to send their daughters to the Middle East for safety reasons. Apart from that, cost is also another consideration for sending their children to Malaysia. Students return more frequently to Singapore compared to their counterparts in the Middle East, some as regular as every week. The MA student interviewed shared that he would return to Singapore once or twice every semester, or once in every four or five weeks (Interview with an MA student in IIUM, 2018).

We also spoke to a number of Singaporeans studying in the other Malaysian universities.[5] Based on our estimate, the Islamic Science University of Malaysia (USIM) has the second highest

number of Singaporean students in Malaysia. Ten undergraduates (nine females and one male) who participated in the focus group discussion expressed that the programme offered upholds the "integration of knowledge" perspective. While the term used differs from IIUM's "Islamization of knowledge", generally, the students' responses also reveal the dominant characteristic of perceived polarity between what is deemed Islamic from western knowledge, hence the need for their "integration". To illustrate, the university offers courses which merge theology and Quranic studies with multimedia studies. The tendency to undermine so called western media in favour of an "Islamic" one, for instance, is not uncommon in the discussion. So far, we do not have any data analysing the quality of students produced from USIM, and how they fare in the job market. Since officials from the university have been active in conducting road shows to attract Singapore madrasah students, and the latter have been organizing study tours to this university, apart from others in Malaysia, we expect Singapore students enrolling into USIM to grow in the years to come.

In addition, we also interviewed the undergraduates doing Islamic studies in the National University of Malaysia (UKM), University of Malaya (UM), International Islamic College of Selangor (KUIS) and Technology University of Malaysia (UTM). As at 2018, there are about four students in UKM, 24 in UM, and 24 in KUIS, and these numbers are based on anecdotal evidence. We are unable to track the numbers in USIM. The ones studying in UKM and UM are mostly from the Singapore madrasahs, but the background of those in KUIS are mixed. Those currently in KUIS shared that they are happy with the college environment because of its "Islamic ambiance". Most of them considered themselves to be "late bloomers" in religious studies. They could not qualify for a diploma certificate in Singapore, but KUIS gave them the lifeline. Compared to other Islamic universities in Malaysia, KUIS is relatively smaller, and many of the students are Malaysians.

Modes of Teaching and Learning: Continuities from the Past?

Apart from factors inducing selection of universities, data obtained also reveal the conditions of their learning environment and dominant modes of teaching and learning in these institutions. Al-Azhar students frequently highlight the informal learning classes (*dars*); students in Jordan and Malaysia, the modern facilities and the modular system while students from Saudi Arabia emphasize their universities' disciplined and regimental styles of teaching. The students rarely discuss the modes of teaching and learning critically and tend to accept the status quo in studying religion as ideal. The data also strongly suggest that to a large extent, the undergraduates' learning experience has not changed significantly from their predecessors though some changes are found in terms of the adoption of the modular system and modes of assessments that mirror those evident in the many modern colleges both in the West and Asia today.

The responses from Al-Azhar undergraduates reveal that there has not been much change in the dominant pedagogy that characterize Islamic studies from what has been shared by their predecessors. The constant central features continue to reveal strong emphasis on reading of classical texts devoid of the social sciences and contemporary scholarship. The mass lecture system persists without the support of tutorials. Assignments are minimal with hardly any emphasis on writing and development of research skills. Mode of assessment continues to be largely examination oriented with the ability to memorize and regurgitate content as the main criterion of success. Class sizes differ from year to year, with some as large as 200 students at one time.

Still, Al-Azhar University offers a well-established and strong *halaqah* culture. Students are free to enroll into these informal learning classes to deepen their knowledge beyond the classroom settings which serve as an additional platform for the development of potential expertise in particular fields of study including Quranic studies. The informal classes allow students greater exposure to competing views and diversity of religious thought. Conducted

by university lecturers within the compounds of mosques in the public, such classes are generally bastions against extremist ideologies. Current undergraduates shared that the openness of the learning environment beyond the formal and informal classes is a major advantage of studying in Cairo. As a respondent when asked why he chose Cairo over Jordan despite being informed of the latter's more systematic and modular education system articulated: "Ultimately, our aim is to gain knowledge, whether through traditional or non-traditional ways." He also added that the *fatwas* of the Egyptian ulama are moderate, and not puritan. Another student, in his second year majoring in theology, concurred: "For me, the uniqueness in Cairo is that it is well known for its *dars* (informal learning)."

Such views find support in others, including a respondent currently in the university's *markaz lughoh* (pre-university Arabic language course). The student also chose Al-Azhar because of opportunities for informal learning, especially in traditional Quranic recitation studies (*sanad*). He had surveyed other universities for similar classes but found they could not match Al-Azhar University's strength in this area. This benefitted students who attended traditional Quranic classes in Cairo through the *talaqi* system—face to face recitation with a master. Some became expert at Quranic teaching when they returned to Singapore. As one student shared: "My first choice was [to study in] Jordan. But my parents sent me to Cairo for three months. They sent me here for *talaqi* Al-Quranic classes. … I [initially] chose Jordan because only a few Asians are studying there. I wanted to go to a university where there are not many Asians, to improve my Arabic. But I changed my mind after being here [in Cairo]. Al-Azhar was [initially] my last choice" (Focus group discussion with students from Al-Azhar, 2019).

Students in Jordan are generally satisfied with the universities there because of the more developed infrastructure, but not so much the quality of knowledge and interaction with scholars. The universities are equipped with modern facilities and some classes offer lessons conducted online. In terms of modes of assessment, UJ has also introduced online examinations system in contrast to

traditional institutions such as the Al-Azhar University. Its modes of assessments include written assignments and research papers. Still, students confessed that in Jordan, they are not exposed to informal learning which is available in Egypt. The mastery of classical Islamic texts is also not as deep as their counterparts in Cairo. As a male undergraduate shared: "It is very difficult to find any teacher (*sheikh*) to have a *halaqah* (face to face, close group discussion) with us. In Jordan, they do not have time for us. Even the late Shaikh Syuib [whom many Singaporean students in Jordan are familiar with]—we get to spend time with him only for a while before Friday prayers" (Interview with an UJ student, 2018).

Despite these limitations, students are generally contented with the learning environment—one that they feel provided a middle ground between Al-Azhar University which was devoid of rules for classroom attendance, and universities in Saudi Arabia in which classroom attendance is compulsory. Generally, they maintain that their lecturers exposed them to diverse religious thought even from scholars beyond the Sunni tradition. They claimed that the university's intellectual culture is one that promotes respect for cultural and religious diversity. Those reading Islamic law, for instance, shared that they were taught other legal traditions within the Sunni world beyond the confines of the Shafie school. When probed further, however, they are unable to provide concrete examples of such diversity of religious thought in relation to specific topics. Furthermore, their attitude towards certain sects, such as Shia, is consistent with other Singapore students studying elsewhere. Moreover, they shared that they are not exposed to contemporary thinkers in their fields of study, such as law, jurisprudence, and theology but are familiar with the lecturers in their own universities. Similar to Al-Azhar, religious studies is largely confessional in nature and the exposure to the social sciences in the teaching of religion is limited, if at all.

Interestingly, Singapore students generally feel that the mode of knowledge transmission in Malaysian universities meets the standards of modern universities because they adopt the lecture-tutorial and the modular system. For Islamic studies, this is not

unique to Malaysia, as a similar system is also adopted in Jordan universities. Students in Malaysia, however, are much attracted to IIUM's promotion of Islamization of knowledge. This is consistent with the views of their graduate seniors. In essence, the concept casts doubt on modern scientific knowledge, based on the notion that its roots are influenced by western epistemology which is secular and by implication devoid of belief in God. This attitude towards knowledge is part of the wider trend espoused by Muslim religious revivalists who polarize knowledge (ie. Islamic versus secular) in the name of Islam. Students shared that this call for Islamization of knowledge continues to penetrate the entire curriculum and underline the teaching philosophy. While their responses reveal that they have difficulties in understanding what the concept actually means, they nonetheless uphold it as Islamic. For instance, a student disclosed that in a political science class, they were taught the discipline from an "Islamic perspective". He was, however, unable to explicate what the term means though the presumption of binary between secular and Islamic knowledge was evident in his response. Another student at the faculty of usuluddin agrees, for example, that research methods are not neutral but are heavily influenced by the western framework unlike the case with Islamic knowledge, which is based on the Quran and Sunnah.

Interaction and Relations with Others Within and Beyond the Campuses

Though at least half of madrasah students enrol into universities in the Middle East, responses through focus group discussions and survey questionnaires indicate that their social interaction with students from the Arab world tends to be circumscribed and generally limited. The majority of the Singaporean students at Al-Azhar shared that their social interactions are largely confined to regular meetings with fellow Singaporeans. They also tend to interact more with students from the region in particular Malaysians and to some extent Indonesians and those from southern Thailand compared to students from the Middle East. Generally, the Southeast

Asian students live in the same district as those from Singapore namely the Seventh District in Cairo.

As with Al-Azhar, the students' social circles and engagement in Jordan are also largely confined to their fellow Singaporean counterparts or at most, those from Southeast Asia. They generally tend to live with their peers from the same country in shared accommodation. Most of the students from the region they interact with are from Malaysia and Indonesia. Contact with students outside the region and beyond the classroom is minimal, if at all. Students' involvement on campus also tend to be confined to the Singapore Students' Association in Jordan (SIRAJ). One male undergraduate from UJ shared: "That is the only disadvantage for us [in Jordan]. We are trying to find classes outside the university. We only study in classes confined to the campus. We are not exposed to the larger society beyond the campus" (Focus group discussion with students from UJ, 2018). His remarks are in response to the limitations of studying in Jordan compared to Al-Azhar University; but they also reveal that Singapore students tend to mingle among themselves and are quite isolated from events and developments within the country or the region. A male student whose views are not an isolated one candidly shared: "We are careful [about joining NGOs or any organizations]. Previously, we were involved in a project to help Syrians [for humanitarian aid]. We were advised by the authorities not to do so, after they found out about our activities through the social media" (Focus group discussion with students from UJ, 2018). One even disclosed that he has no contact whatsoever with any Jordanian of his age: "I would rate my contact with them [Jordanians] as zero" (Focus group discussion with students from UJ, 2018). Interactions with local Jordanian students are restricted to academic matters such as conducting group assignments. Conversely, they shared that they would attend seminars organized by Malaysian students there, and describe their relationship with their Southeast Asian neighbours as cordial.

In the same vein, Singapore students from the various universities in Saudi Arabia also generally tend to interact with one another or with students from the Malay world. A fair

number are involved in student organizations namely Ittihad Mahasiswa Singapura Al Mamlakah Al Arabia As Saudia (IMAM). The majority of students participating in this organization are from IUM. Some of the students have their spouses and children staying with them.

Students in Malaysia are more active in student associations. There are also more interactions with local Malaysian students compared to their peers in the Middle East. Language and cultural similarities facilitate cross country engagements. A student currently pursuing an MA degree in jurisprudence in IIUM, and obtained his BA from the same university, shared: "I usually hang out with my Singaporean friends. I have a lot of Malaysian and international friends." During his days as an undergraduate pursuing his BA, he was part of the media society which was his CCA (co-curricular activities). But still, he found it difficult to mingle with other students and skipped many meetings. "I was part of the media team. Now I'm not so active like before because I am very busy." He also shared that "this association organizes a lot of activities so it's hard to attend meetings. I've retired [from it]. Except that I still support them by going to their events" (Interview with an MA student from IIUM, 2018). A female undergraduate from IIUM shared the same sentiments about being closer to Singaporeans and Malaysians. In her words:

> I stick mostly with Singaporean students. Other than them, I am not close to the [other] international students because I think there's a cultural barrier. I had a roommate from Sudan, I think. Asians are pretty much reserved while they are noisy. They can blast songs at 4:00 am and you are just trying to sleep. Even after you text them, "can you lower down the volume", they will just say sorry and they will repeat it the next day. It's just that part that is quite difficult because they don't understand you and you don't understand them. And it's part of their culture so you cannot stop them because it's their culture and they are doing what they have been doing. So all you have to do is to just change room" (Interview with an undergraduate student from IIUM, 2018).

Some students even shared that because they were too busy with their studies, they would normally keep to themselves and not even mix with Singaporeans. A female undergraduate conveyed,

> I don't really hang out with the Singaporean students much nor do I hang out with the Malaysians. I feel like it's a balance. Because my current workload is a lot. So I have to spend more time inside the room doing my own studies and revision. If I were to do my co-curricular activities, it will always be with Malaysians—doing drama and all (Interview with a female undergraduate from IIUM, 2018).

For some, even relations with Malaysian counterparts are not that strong. Although some have been elected to hold positions in student bodies, they shared that they feel ostracized by the larger student community because though they are Malays, they are nevertheless seen as "foreigners".

Anecdotal evidence gathered from interviews and discussions with the undergraduates about the level of interaction with non-Southeast Asian students is consistent with our survey data. Staying close with fellow Singaporeans is also another common finding across the different universities. Asked about the extent they interact with students of other nationalities, only 51.9 per cent said that they do so. However, 79.6 per cent mentioned that they spent most of their time with Singapore students. About 88 per cent of the students shared that they participate in activities organized by Singapore students while 52.8 per cent declared that they are very active in Singapore student associations. Only 16 per cent said they are close to local students from their host countries. Data also reveals that apart from theological issues, the undergraduates do not follow current affairs closely. For example, only 6.5 per cent of undergraduates follow social and political developments in Singapore very closely while 28.7 per cent kept up with such developments. Even fewer kept up with social and political developments in the countries they are studying in. Only 2.8 per cent followed such issues very closely while 16.7 per cent responded that they do keep up with them. This implies

that while overseas, the majority are not exposed to or follow current affairs both on the Middle East and on Southeast Asia. Their responses also indicate their network on issues affecting student life in campus. Most do not interact with non-Muslims but are more comfortable interacting with fellow Muslims from other countries and discuss similar issues and topics concerning religion.

Undergraduate Life: Support Rendered and Challenges

An issue that is raised during our survey, focus group discussions, and interviews is the extent and nature of support the students receive in the course of their studies abroad. Most students express concerns with finances for living expenses and tuition fees. As mentioned earlier, the current batch of undergraduates generally come from the lower middle-income families. Some receive financial support provided by local authorities, civil society, universities (through scholarships and bursaries) and private donations. We observe that students in Malaysia, Egypt and Saudi Arabia are better able to cope with financial expenses compared to other students.

Relative to students in other universities in the Middle East, those from Al-Azhar feel that they are able to afford living in Cairo as the cost of living is relatively lower. Most students also resort to sharing apartments with their schoolmates (mostly from Singapore). Fees are also manageable. Apart from financial support, students in Cairo shared that they have a strong communication channel with Muis. A student liaison officer, who is a Muis staff based in Cairo, has long been assigned to oversee their needs. The officer works closely with the Singapore Embassy there. Apart from addressing administrative issues faced by current students relating to their studies, the officer also arranges for enrichment courses for them beyond the campus. One such tie-up is with the Al-Azhar Observatory for Combating Extremism, an institute created by the Egyptian government to tackle Islamic radicalism. The centre runs online lectures and has a publishing unit that

focus on disseminating information and publications aimed at countering radical ideas. Many of these publications have been translated into various languages including English, Chinese, French and Dutch.

Like their seniors, however, most expressed dissatisfaction with the facilities in these "third world" universities in terms of infrastructure and administration that are deemed to be far from student-centric. Security concerns are also consistently highlighted by many of the respondents who spoke on numerous incidences of harassment and crime (especially theft) in the city though they feel safe within the university compounds where security is ensured. One student shared how his wife and him were almost robbed in their first week in Cairo. A gang of thieves disguised as policemen demanded for their passports. He was told to get into the back seat of the car if he wanted his passport back.[6] When he demanded it back the thieves drove off dragging him with them for a few meters.

The cost of living in Jordan is relatively higher than in Cairo though within the former, living expenses within the capital city of Amman is higher than further away. Students shared that the cost of living in Jordan is higher than in the other Middle Eastern countries. Those able to meet the cut-off point to enrol into the university, however, get their tuition fees subsidized. Some students obtained support from Malay/Muslim organizations in Singapore such as LBKM to finance their studies. However, they maintained that the amount of sponsorship received from the local institutions do not suffice to cover their fees. One female undergraduate student shared: "The sponsorship from a local institution can only cover the fees for one semester, how about the other semesters?" (Focus group discussion with students from UJ, 2019). The same student disclosed that while Muis provides pre-departure briefing for students before they leave Singapore, she contended that the exercise mainly touches on academic, travel and safety matters and tips on how to do well academically, but little else including academic counselling on choice of universities, fields of study and their impact on employment prospects subsequently.

Respondents studying in Jordan also expressed the view that more resources are given to their counterparts in Al-Azhar University. They feel that the Singapore madrasahs' curriculum and syllabus are largely devised to prepare students for Al-Azhar University though they are unable to elaborate how this has disadvantaged them and why. Some even shared during the focus group discussions that academic and career guidance from madrasah on studying abroad other than in Egypt and Jordan are severely lacking. Conversely, some of the current students in Jordan maintained that they would even consider studying in Indonesia had they been given some guidance from their schools and policymakers (Focus group discussion with students from UJ, 2019).

Current undergraduates in Saudi Arabia mirror the views of their seniors who had graduated that the Kingdom takes care of their needs and welfare. They only needed to show interest and commitment to the studies without even the need for a foundation in madrasah education. All students in the Kingdom are provided with scholarships, accommodation, and stipends. Students are not needed to take on additional employment in the Kingdom and some married students bring their families along. Still, the stipend may not be sufficient for married students to sustain their family, and hence they take on additional part-time employment, such as assisting Singapore based companies that offer Haj and umrah guidance services, and engaging in small businesses, such as selling honey and dates, to make ends meet. The students also shared that while Muis oversees them and has also established a Student Liaison Officer (SLO) to look into their affairs, the officer is based in Jeddah, a five hours drive away from Medina. The same officer also serves students in Jordan and Kuwait. However, some of the students perceive that Muis and the Malay/Muslim leaders prefer to make connections with Al-Azhar students more than with them, though one spokesperson from Imam shared that this trend is slowly changing. It is without doubt that when politicians meet with them, a topic of concern revolves around the need to contextualize religious teachings to suit the context of Singapore. The reason for this focus is never

discussed in the open, but the students view this emphasis as not isolated from the strong perception of Saudi Arabian graduates with Salafi-Wahhabism.

Similarly, the current students in Malaysia are generally satisfied with their learning experience. Like their counterparts in the other universities, students in Malaysia feel that the Singapore authorities can help them more with financial support for their needs. However, the students find the cost of their university education and living in Malaysia generally affordable. Some stay on campus, others in shared apartments with their classmates, or with their Singaporean relatives living in Malaysia. Those from the middle-income families can make frequent trips back to Singapore on weekends via land and air transport. Students studying in Malaysia are generally not within Muis' radar as they are not required to inform Muis unlike those studying in the Middle East universities which require Muis' letter of no objection. This procedure allows Muis to keep track of the students' activities in the Middle East.

Major Concerns: Career Opportunities upon Graduation

While concerns about Islamic studies graduates have often revolved around security issues (such as Arabization or Salafi-Wahhabism), the undergraduates themselves do not consider this as pertinent compared to their future lives after graduation. One female undergraduate from Al-Azhar University opined: "If the concern has to do with being influenced by the Middle Eastern way of life, then we [referring to her seniors] would all have been influenced [by Arabization] a long time ago" (Focus group discussion with students from Al-Azhar, 2019). Instead, a common concern of the students in the focus group discussions is the issue of job prospects and the salary that asatizah can command.

The undergraduates we spoke to are aware of the challenges facing Islamic studies graduates in terms of employment. Interestingly, the majority of the students studying at Al-Azhar University do not see themselves as religious scholars or teachers

(*asatizah*) when they graduate despite pursuing religious studies all the while. The majority articulate that they aspire to venture into areas outside the religious sector such as counselling, social work and psychology. This response is unsurprising given constant reiterations by the community's leaders to this effect and the recommendations by COFA. The strong statements made by them that asatizah can explore opportunities in social work, medicine, legal, and technology sectors upon graduation in the attempt to professionalize them and enable them to find suitable jobs have also shored this sentiment amongst the students. Responses, however, also reveal that generally the students are unaware of the academic qualifications required for these professions and how they will be able to qualify for entry.

Our data shows that only 8.3 per cent are very certain about their career options after graduation, while 23.1 per cent indicate that they are sure. Like the students from Al-Azhar, most Jordanian university students believe that they will likely end up working in mosques or Malay/Muslim organizations, especially Muis and Pergas. A current female YU undergraduate said that she hopes to be a Malay language teacher in a national school upon graduation (Focus group discussion with students from YU, 2019). She wanted to follow in her senior's footstep, and believes she can qualify for the diploma programme at the National Institute of Education (NIE) which is mandated for those teaching in national schools, with her 'A' Level certificate. That she is spending years pursuing Islamic studies which is irrelevant to her career aspiration does not seem to matter to her decision. Similarly, a number of undergraduates shared that they aim to enter the social service sector but are again uncertain about the skills and training required to qualify for jobs in that sector. One female undergraduate from YU, for instance, shared that she is interested to work in the prisons service, doing *dakwah* (Islamic preaching) while others mentioned social work. Even so, they tend to presume that their degree in Islamic studies is adequate for them to be accepted into these professions (Focus group discussion with students from YU, 2019).

While most expressed interest in exploring careers outside of religious teaching, some who are obviously motivated by the

few asatizah employed in the area of counter-terrorism research using the lens of theology, also expressed a desire for a career in research. Incongruence between their job aspirations and field of study is evidently stark, unless they undergo studies in the areas they want to be skilled in which requires considerable commitment in terms of time and resources. While Al-Azhar also prides itself in teaching other disciplines such as the humanities and the social sciences, the students do not seem to be aware of the broader subject offerings of the university which are highly necessary and useful not only in terms of widening potential job prospects but are also imperative for religious studies.

For many of the students who are enrolled into UJ or YU, their career paths upon graduation are also not a major consideration when choosing the university or subject field. Unlike in the past and like their counterparts in Al-Azhar, many are ambivalent or uncertain of becoming religious teachers/scholars when they graduate. While they have expectations of pursuing alternative career options that strongly mirror those articulated by dominant elites within the community, none have given much thought in how they plan to achieve it.[7] Similarly, students in Malaysia have concerns with what awaits them upon their return. Many shared that getting a job they are interested in is their main concern. They agreed that jobs for the Islamic studies graduates do not pay well and sectors affiliated to Muis tend to offer a higher salary. Some students shared that while they chose to read Islamic studies, they did not want to become religious teachers; instead, they wanted to explore other sectors, such as teaching in the national schools. However, they do not elaborate on the subjects they can teach in national schools or how they would qualify. A female undergraduate from IIUM sharing of this sentiment about being a religious teacher sums up how despite their reluctance about becoming an asatizah, they may have to accept the reality that they will end up becoming one:

> One thing I always say to myself is, I definitely don't want to be an *ustazah*. But then again, I also know being an ustazah does not only mean the traditional/conventional way. Regardless, if you

> go anywhere to dakwah, you are still an ustazah, because you teach (Interview with a female undergraduate from IIUM, 2018).

Exposure to Alternative Viewpoints and Development of Critical Thinking

In our survey, we included questions to understand the undergraduates' orientation regarding contemporary issues. We also wanted to understand their ability to evaluate religious opinions in the context of Singapore, which is also a means to test their sense of current affairs. The extent of the students' ability to appreciate Singapore's multiracial and multi-religious society and secularism is the overriding concern.

To understand how active they are in participating in informal learning outside their formal curriculum, we asked about their attendance in *usrah* sessions (campus discussion sessions) and *halaqahs* (traditional study circles with certification from prominent religious scholars), and other enrichment classes. Only 35.2 per cent said they attended usrah sessions (among students), 43.5 per cent attended halaqahs (with accredited teachers but outside formal classroom environments) and 65.7 per cent attended other enrichment classes. For the halaqahs, the topics discussed are Islamic studies in traditional settings, religious sciences, hadith narration and transmission, and spiritualist and traditional *kitabs* (Islamic texts). We reckoned that Al-Azhar University students are active in attending these discussions because they are widely available in Cairo. For the enrichment classes, the students shared topics ranging from self-improvement, current affairs, to study tips. We reckon that attendance for halaqahs is widely skewed towards Al-Azhar students, as there are limited opportunities for students in the other countries to attend such informal classes.

Social media has become part and parcel of contemporary life where many engage with one another. In fact, during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the Singapore government enforced the "circuit breaker" and restricted gatherings of people, this led to closures of places of worship including mosques, and suspension of Friday prayers and classes. This has forced the asatizah to

carry on with their classes online. Interestingly, the question was asked before the pandemic hit the world, but their responses can reflect their digital readiness. About 58.3 per cent shared that they partake in religious discourse on social media, such as posting, sharing, commenting, and liking, but only 38.9 per cent consider social media as the platform shaping their religious thought and worldview. This view will likely change after the COVID-19 hit the world, as they will be forced to utilize online platforms. This will change the dynamics of religious transmission, as they will compete with global graduates and preachers for the same limited Singapore market. Malaysian and Indonesian preachers will be their closest competitors given that they too can capture the Malay/Muslim market with their ability to speak Malay.

We also asked the respondents to rank which groups represent Islam and listed down various schools of thought and jurisprudents. Almost all claimed Shafie school, which is the school promoted among Singaporeans and Southeast Asians, followed by the other three legal schools (Hanafi, Hanbali, and Maliki) representing Sunni Islam. For the other Shia options, such as Zaidi, Imamiyah, Ja'fari, less than 8 per cent of the respondents agree that they are mainstream or acceptable within the fold of Islam. Thus, despite all the sharing that Islamic universities encourage openness and diversity, and respect for alternative views, they remain sceptical of sects that international and renowned scholars have considered to be part of the Muslim faith.

During our survey and focus group discussions, we asked the undergraduates who their intellectual mentors are. The majority could not cite any particular scholar beyond their immediate lecturers though some students in Malaysia were able to highlight them more than their counterparts in the Middle East. However, when we probed into how extensive and effective their engagement with their professors have been in the focus group sessions, many struggle to relate these or discuss the intellectual contributions of these lecturers and how their ideas had impacted them.

However, survey response reveal that the undergraduates perceive their senior graduates as their intellectual mentors. The more prominent amongst these are former Mufti Mohamed Fatris

Bakaram (who was still the mufti when the interviews were carried out) and the current Mufti Naziruddin Mohd Nasir. They also consider some global online preachers such as Nouman Ali Khan, Ismail Menk, and Yusuf Al-Qaradawi as their spiritual mentors, even though some of these names have been flagged by security agencies as promoting extremism. These preachers have wide global following because they are English speaking and utilize social media in propagating religion. One student from IIUM, for instance, upholds some of these preachers as the standard for Singapore asatizah to achieve. He said: "I think our asatizah, some of them, are still … not up to the level of Dr Zakir Naik or Tariq Ramadhan [on *fiqh* issues], to actually do what these scholars are doing" (Interview with an MA student from IIUM, 2018). Interestingly, they are unable to name major thinkers and intellectuals from Southeast Asia including Syed Hussein Alatas, Nurcholish Madjid, Abdurrahman Wahid, Syafii Maarif, Chandra Muzaffar and numerous others well-known for their intellectual contributions to religious reform in the region and beyond. The undergraduates are clearly unfamiliar with their works, even though the problems they raise on the impediments and obstacles to reconstruction of society informed by humanistic tradition and contemporary philosophy are highly relevant to the Malay world, if not the larger Muslim world.

The students' preference for Middle Eastern or global preachers or televangelists notwithstanding, their choices are also selective. For instance, when we mentioned the names of Middle Eastern progressive thinkers such as Egyptian Muhammad Sa'id Al-Ashmawi (b.1932–d.2013), Egyptian philosopher Hassan Hanafi (b.1935), or US-based jurist Khaled Abou El Fadl (b.1963), the undergraduates are clearly unfamiliar with their works, nor have they heard about them. The only exception is the Swiss religious scholar Tariq Ramadan, but the fact that he had been invited to Singapore by Muis more than once for public lectures and seminars may be a factor that has influenced their response. Their response also reveals that their exposure to Middle Eastern scholars tends to be limited only to theology and not other fields of knowledge.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we generally observe that the undergraduates' motivations for pursuing religious studies is consistent with that of their seniors. Essentially apart from parental influence, the students' choices are determined by advice given by their madrasahs and other pragmatic considerations such as funding opportunities, university admission criteria including the required academic background, and proximity to Singapore in some cases. However, madrasah graduates now have more options other than Al-Azhar University or Malaysian universities to choose from. Policymakers are encouraging them to consider Jordan universities, even though the students make these decisions not based on the quality of their curriculum and pedagogy or modes of teaching and learning, but the availability of modern facilities including the use of information technology. Data also reveal strengths and limitations between universities in terms of formal and informal learning and the extent of the students' development along with these. For Al-Azhar undergraduates, informal learning promoted by prominent scholars is widely available, but the overriding issue is whether they can harness it effectively to develop critical thinking skills and awareness of relevant problems.

Data reveal that generally religious studies undergraduates are not keen to serve as religious teachers or become religious scholars when they return. On the contrary, many are interested in exploring work outside the religious sector. The reasons for this vary. While some believe that job prospects beyond the traditional sectors are over saturated by current graduates, others complain about the low salary in relation to the current living standards in Singapore. On the other hand, a number believe that with their Islamic studies degree, they can transition into other sectors because they are equipped with both religious and secular knowledge. It is not only the students from Malaysian universities who articulate this view, which is understandable because of the nature of their curriculum, but also those from the Middle Eastern universities as well. While asatizah can certainly enter these sectors, the responses

reveal a general lack of understanding of what it entails for them to be reskilled.

This chapter also reveals that generally predominant modes of teaching and learning religion across the various universities remain traditionalistic. Exposure to contemporary knowledge and progressive scholars in the Middle East are also critically lacking as is the emphasis on the development of inquiring and critical spirits. The problem is exacerbated by the alienation of religious studies from the social sciences. Students' social milieu and interaction also tend to be confined to fellow Singaporeans or those from the region especially their Malaysian peers. There is little evidence that they are informed by the larger social and political developments occurring within the countries and region of study. While this may indicate that they are generally shielded from radical ideas and are also not becoming Arabized which are the concerns of Singapore leaders, the data also strongly suggest that the students are alienated from progressive religious thinkers within or beyond the religious fields to better understand the society they live in. While greater exposure to the latter is imperative at enhancing social awareness and developing social capital, the responses, however, do not point to such a direction. The students interviewed also tend to be cut off from Singapore's development during their education abroad. The fact that male students are not called up for national service has but compounded the problem. Their limited awareness of developments in Singapore and the region bear implications on the prospects of understanding the relevance of religious teachings in concrete social, economic and political conditions of society. The extent of their awareness of the context in which they operate bear direct ramifications on how they conceive religious teachings and its effects on the development of the community.

NOTES

1. See Muis Academy website, "The Postgraduate Certificate in Islam in Contemporary Societies (PCICS)", https://www.muis.gov.sg/muisacademy/Programmes/PCICS (accessed 30 March 2020).

2. In a data shared by Muis, there are about 1,330 undergraduates spread across the Middle East and Southeast Asia, minus Iran and South Asia. The number of students based in Indonesia and Yemen are based on estimates.
3. As will be discussed later, numerous financial assistance and grants provided by the local and overseas institutions for those pursuing Islamic studies degrees have reduced the students' financial needs.
4. We conducted several rounds of discussions with students currently studying at the Al-Azhar University in Cairo. In Cairo, most of the meetings were conducted at the Singapore students association centre Perkemas. We also met the undergraduates when they returned to Singapore for their semester break. Majority of the current students completed their primary and secondary education at Madrasah Aljunied Al-Islamiah. With the exception of one student who is completing her MA, all others are undergraduates.
5. These interviews were conducted during the first quarter of 2018.
6. The student has recently graduated and is currently back in Singapore.
7. Danial, an Al-Azhar graduate, presented a critique to students who chose to pursue studies in the Middle East including Jordan: "Yes Jordan is a good university, but when you come back, what do you want to do with it [the degree]?"

5

CHALLENGES, GENESIS AND PROSPECTS FOR DEVELOPMENT

Introduction

This chapter focuses on major challenges and problems encountered by Singapore's *asatizah* graduates upon their return from completing Islamic studies abroad. Factors including the genesis in the surge of religious studies graduates in Singapore which have contributed to the current challenges faced by them will be discussed. The impact of dominant discourse in recent decades on the significance of asatizah in guiding the community to adapt to change and the need for them to contextualize Islam to suit the conditions of Singapore's pluralistic society amid evidence of Islamist extremism as well as policies and measures aimed at professionalizing them are also examined. The overriding aim is to analyse the extent to which these have facilitated critical attention on the need to revaluate Islamic studies education, crucial for the well-being of the community and the larger society.

Data obtained from in-depth interviews, survey responses and focus group discussions with returning religious studies graduates

and undergraduates as highlighted in the previous chapters reveal that until the mid-1980s, the number of those who went abroad to pursue religious education was very few. Today, the situation has changed significantly with more having completed tertiary religious education in foreign universities abroad. While the traditional centre of religious learning for local asatizah in the past was Al-Azhar University in Egypt, data reveal that in the last two decades or so, their option has expanded to include other universities in Egypt and the Middle East more generally, including those in Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Syria, Yemen and Libya. Students have also continued to study in Malaysian universities though in its relatively newer established ones, as well as in Brunei and Indonesia. Malaysian Islamic studies centres, such as Kolej Islam in Klang which used to be the educational destination for those who did not or could not pursue religious studies in the Middle East, are becoming less common today given the rise in competing institutions. While UM and UKM religious studies departments or academies continue to attract students, the relatively newer established ones such as IIUM (International Islamic University Malaysia) are noticeably fast replacing them. Others that are seeing increasing enrolment are USIM (Islamic Science University of Malaysia), KUIS (International Islamic College of Selangor) and UTM (Technological University of Malaysia). They offer religious studies as well as other subject fields based on the Islamization or integration of knowledge framework. A couple of asatizah have also returned from various universities in Indonesia though noticeably not from the more prominent Indonesian State Islamic Universities (UIN) in the major cities of the country. They include Imam Bonjol State Islamic University, University of Muhammadiyah Malang and Ibn Khaldun University in Bogor. Brunei's Sultan Sharif Ali Islamic University (UNISSA) is also becoming an option for some in recent years. The majority of the graduates majored in theology, sharia and Islamic jurisprudence, Quran exigencies, hadith studies as well as more recently, Islamic banking and finance, Islamic economics and dakwah studies.

Apart from the long established tradition of religious learning abroad, enrolment into these institutions have also been facilitated

by memorandums of understanding (MOUs) and twinning programmes with partner universities abroad such as the ones between Madrasah Aljunied and Al-Azhar University and Pergas with IIUM. There is also the more recent move by madrasahs to collaborate with Jordan universities. Generous support received in the form of grants, scholarships and subsidized tuition fees or fee waivers offered by foreign universities such as those in Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Brunei also provide attractive inducement. Apart from these, foundation programmes offered by various Islamic boarding schools for foreign students unable to gain direct entry into Middle Eastern universities such as Al-Azhar have also facilitated the local asatizah's admission into universities abroad.

The last three decades are also seeing noticeable change in the background of students pursuing religious studies or combined with other disciplines in western-style Islamic universities. While in the past they emerged predominantly from full-time madrasahs, a fair number doing so today, received their education from the national schools and have switched to pursue religious studies at the tertiary level. While some make their way directly to universities that do not require religious studies background such as those in Saudi Arabia, others do so by attending twinning programmes organized by local institutions partnering with foreign universities. Examples of such programmes include those offered by Al Zuhri Institute, Muhammadiyah Islamic College and Pergas which have paired up with universities in Malaysia and Indonesia mentioned earlier. Some of these are graduate programmes that attract Muslim professionals. Graduate scholarships and grants from the foreign universities also provide sources of financial support for some.

Challenges

While the move towards higher education in religious studies or other disciplines in Islamic universities abroad is seeing an upward trend, Chapter 3 reveals that generally returning graduates in religious studies are confronted with serious challenges. Major amongst these is the ability to secure employment of a decent

salary. Unlike in the past when religious studies graduates are more likely to find ready employment as religious functionaries in key religious institutions such as the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis), the Registry of Muslim Marriages (ROMM), the Sharia Court or as religious teachers in madrasah, such opportunities are increasingly difficult to come by today given the larger pool of these graduates and limited placements. Furthermore, many do not aspire to become religious teachers but generally have high expectations of entering the labour market to undertake a range of jobs besides teaching. However, barriers to entry for many jobs that they seek, reflect the stark reality that confronts them. This common experience is clearly incongruent with dominant discourse among the community elites which constantly reiterate that asatizah are equipped with relevant training and knowledge in both religion and modern knowledge to enable them to undertake jobs especially in the helping or social service professions such as counsellors, social workers and educationalists. They are also touted as being able to work as researchers and in other related sectors to help combat the myriad social problems confronting the community. The formative educational experience of the students in the local full-time madrasahs, most of which offer both the national curriculum and examinations in addition to the religious one as well as their tertiary education overseas, have been often said to equip them with the much needed balance and training for such jobs. Such educational training is deemed to adequately prepare them both as moral Muslim professionals as well as religious teachers and scholars.

In reality, however, many encounter serious challenges upon their return in getting access to these professions. Generally, graduates are also unsure of the kinds of relevant and accredited certification needed for entry into these professions with their largely Arabic medium religious studies qualifications. Even those who pursue disciplines apart from religious studies such as sociology, political science, media and communications combined with Islamic studies in Islamic universities where the medium of instruction is Malay and Arabic are confronted with the same experience. While many attempt to develop themselves

professionally by undertaking continuing programmes in service related areas such as counselling, family therapy and others organized by MMOs (Malay-Muslim Organizations), the general response reveal a lack of awareness if these courses prepare them adequately for entry into those professions.

Securing jobs in the religious sector has also become highly competitive with many asatizah vying for limited placements. While mosques do offer positions for management and administration in the areas of planning and executing various programmes and events including part-time religious classes for all age groups, preschool education, youth and family development programmes, haj classes and other services, quota for jobs even in this domain are quickly filled due to limited vacancies. While the general response from respondents strongly convey their initial predicament with undertaking such jobs given the low salary scale and limited career progression, even access into this sector is proving itself to be challenging. Some mosques have even attempted to create more positions in the bid to absorb a larger number of graduates into their fold. While well-intended, this move has had the unwarranted effect of levelling down further the salary scale of employees. Responses indicate that the salary range of administrators in mosques and MMOs is between S$1,200 and S$2,200, hardly sufficient to support a family by Singapore's standard of living. Similar challenges extend to employment opportunities in the MMOs such as Pergas, Muhammadiyah, LBKM, or privately run madrasahs.

Graduates endowed with resources and/or greater access to social capital, tend to venture into businesses that focus on religious services such as haj and umrah packages as well as halal tourist packages to several predominantly Muslim countries. Most of these, however, are family owned enterprises that employ a handful of asatizah based on their experience in having lived in the Middle East as students. Other halal consumer businesses that range from food to religious products including Islamic finance also provide new and attractive sources of employment though entry into these jobs are usually highly competitive and opportunities are secured through personal contacts and networks. While our

study did come across few talented religious studies graduates who have succeeded in building their business networks with Malaysian and Indonesian counterparts, such cases are clearly exceptions and cannot be easily replicated. In more recent years, some of these graduates are also making their presence in new domains such as in religious healing, otherwise known as *ru'yah.* While in the past, it was not uncommon to turn to asatizah for healing the sick, this service has become commercialized going by the advertisements in the Malay media. Touted as "Islamic" medicine, those promoting this service, market it as a remedy for a diverse range of psychological, mental and physical illnesses. They conduct classes on weekends for a fee that aims not only at creating awareness of and teaching those interested in this form of "spiritual" remedy, but also demonstrate their expertise in curing "spirit" interventions amongst clients believed to inhabit their bodies and adversely affect their health and well-being. This budding enterprise is also not generally open to graduates who are not subjected to similar belief or mode of thought. While generally, returning graduates do gradually find employment in many of these diverse areas, such employment is often not their preference. Furthermore, the challenge amongst many that persists is the lack of progressive career pathways for the jobs they do for their welfare and development. The lack of standards and benchmark in determining salary range for graduates working for mosques and MMOs compound the problem.

Our findings consistently reveal that while many have pursued religious studies, becoming a religious teacher or scholar is not a preference among them though a substantial number do end up as the former. However, demand for religious teachers also presents challenges given the growing numbers of graduates in this profession. There is as yet no up-to-date data on the adequacy of religious teachers in relation to the needs of the community. While the government has imposed a cap on enrolment in full-time madrasah at 400 annually in lieu of compulsory education since 2003, it is unclear if this projection continues to apply today. Furthermore, the figure does not reflect graduates from part-time madrasahs and the national schools who moved on to

obtain Islamic religious education abroad. The fact that there is no age limit for religious teachers' employment as a respondent highlighted, exacerbates the challenge, especially for the younger asatizah seeking entry into this sector. While those with greater access to social capital and are more adapt to using social media have devised unconventional strategies in teaching religion targeted at young professionals which secures a lucrative niche for themselves, many continue to resort to teaching part-time in Muis' *Alive* programmes in mosques or privately run madrasahs on weekends and after school hours to supplement their income. Some only teach part-time as the salary they command is said to be higher than if they teach full time. Interviews also reveal that many returning asatizah lack confidence to teach religion, conduct sermons or find the role challenging. Questions posed by students even on matters of rituals apart from social issues are found at times to be daunting. In the words of a religious studies graduate who read Islamic philosophy at Al-Azhar University: "My challenge is in answering their whys. It is very challenging. Very, very challenging" (Interview with Badruddin, 2019).

Apart from teaching religion through these platforms, teaching Arabic professionally in language centres or jobs that require a strong command of the language as well as tuition classes, offer opportunities for some. However, very few are trained in Arabic language or literature (outside religious studies) in their tertiary institutions. Equally pertinent, those who ventured into other disciplines in Middle Eastern universities apart from religious studies which may open greater opportunities for employment is very negligible. Out of the forty-nine respondents interviewed, only one from the University of Jordan read social science namely sociology taught in Arabic. Responses indicate that the choice of universities they went to and the selection of their majors were done without guidance from any formal bodies or awareness of their relevance to job prospects.

Since the attack of 9/11, strong national concern with the potent threat of terrorism in the name of Islam to the security and well-being of the nation has seen the rise in research and teaching relating to security and counter-terrorism studies. The

need for asatizah in this domain has been accompanied by a small number admitted to support such research. Here again, these few possessed higher qualifications in religious studies and/or have better access to social capital. Positions available for such jobs are clearly minimal. Another budding area of employment for some religious studies graduates relates to that of inter-faith and inter-ethnic relations promoted mainly by grassroots organizations, NGOs and MMOs. While strong concerns in these areas bearing on national security and social cohesion are evident, job opportunities are again not unlimited and tend to be more easily available to those with stronger access to these networks and who possess a good command of the English language, which is not the forte of many graduates. Employment prospects for those returning madrasah graduates in non-religious sectors are also generally confined to MMOs. While some have been employed in the media and IT sectors, administration, counselling and preschool education, none of the respondents in this study have secured employment in the public sector other than Muis.

These problems encountered by returning graduates though not novel have become more serious given the much larger pool of madrasah graduates since the 1980s, including those from the part-time madrasahs that have sprouted all over the country in the last three decades. It is pertinent to examine the genesis of the conditions for the surge in demand for religious education not only given its ramifications faced by Islamic studies graduates today in planning ahead.

Genesis of Demand for Religious Education

Generally, Singapore's asatizah obtained their formative religious education in the local madrasah. Until the late 1970s, madrasah did not attract student enrolment and the numbers of asatizah it produced were significantly smaller than currently. First introduced in the early part of the twentieth century during the colonial period, madrasah co-existed with traditional informal home or *surau* (small prayer spaces) based Quranic classes which taught Muslim children and adolescents how to recite the Quran and

inculcated devotional aspects of worship and the values and teachings of Islam. A modernist type of religious school in terms of administration and curriculum, madrasah served the historical function of training students to become clerics, scholars and religious functionaries for the community. It exposed students to print media which opened windows to the world. Students were trained not only in literacy skills in Malay and Arabic within its formal curriculum but also some aspects of modern knowledge such as Maths, Geography and History. Apart from its contribution towards enhancing the religious life and institutions of the community, the gross limitations of the vernacular schools and limited access to English schools for the majority of the Malays during the colonial era also enhanced its significance for some. Other than local students, the more established ones attracted others from the region, some of whom subsequently made their way into prestigious Islamic centres of learning in the Middle East especially Al-Azhar University and were later appointed to significant positions as religious functionaries or became prominent scholars in their respective countries.

Yet, madrasahs in Singapore remained traditional amid the rapidly changing socio-economic conditions and did not attract high enrolment compared to vernacular schools. Left very much on their own as private institutions set up and managed by philanthropists outside the purview of the colonial government, the curriculum remained predominantly centred on theological subjects and pedagogy, shaped by the learning tradition of the founding masters as traditionalistic. Though some modern subjects were taught, these schools generally cannot be compared to the independent or private Christian mission schools in terms of preparing students for the needs of the modernizing society. Early attempts to modernize the madrasah did not gain much community support. For instance, reformist Syed Sheikh Al-Hadi's (b.1867–d.1934) attempt to set up his own modern madrasah, Al-Iqbal, in 1907 which incorporated the teaching of modern knowledge such as science, mathematics, history, geography and the English language, failed to sustain after only a year due to the lack of financial support from Muslim philanthropists from

the business and trading classes who had traditionally funded religious schools and madrasah through religious endowment or *wakaf*. Following the demise of Al-Iqbal, madrasah imported religious teachers from the Middle East whose mode of teaching religion remained predominantly traditionalistic. The failure of this pioneering attempt at reforming religious education was in the words of an academic "... a slap in the face for a movement that came up against the influential traditional ulama who held the reformist ideas as contradictory to Islam" (Mukhlis 2006, p. 33).

Aloof from currents of change, madrasah educational development was also not taken up by Malay community leaders prior to the war. Such efforts spearheaded by the largely English educated members of Kesatuan Melayu Singapura (KMS) or Singapore Malay Union founded in 1926, largely focused on alleviating the dismal state of Malay vernacular education and the need for English education and trade schools for the Malays. Even the English-educated and wealthier sections of the Arabs and Jawi Peranakan (locally born Muslims of mixed Indian and Malay descent) who were the major groups that articulated the socio-economic concerns of the community prior to the formation of KMS, hardly concerned itself with religious education. The policy of non-interference of the colonial administration in religious education also reinforced their isolation though it would not be reasonable to accord their lack of development then to colonial educational policy, as even the private Christian mission and Chinese schools that developed vibrantly were subjected to the same policies.

Isolated Muslim voices in the 1930s did articulate for the promotion of an alternative type of school much like the Christian mission grants-in-aid schools established by non-Muslim individuals which blended religious education with modern subjects in the English medium that would reflect the values and ideals of the community while preparing students for respectable professions (*The Straits Budget, Singapore*, 24 August 1939, p. 11). Though this may have facilitated prospect for revaluation of madrasah education and training for asatizah, such proposal did not create sufficient interest among the community's elites.

The lack of attention by the community's elites on religious education and the development of religious teachers and scholars persisted even after World War II. The Majlis Pelajaran Melayu (MEC, Malay Education Council), an umbrella organization formed in 1955 comprising the Singapore Malay Teachers' Union and fifty-one other Malay/Muslim organizations which had rallied in response to the Re-Orientation Plan made no attempt to advocate for religious schools to be incorporated into the debate on education for the Malays though it championed for Malay-based education right up to the university with English as a subject (Noor Aisha and Idris 2019, pp. 19–29). In 1960, there were on record about fifty madrasah-type schools and others offering religious education in the country and just prior to the war, about 2,000 Muslim boys and girls were attending madrasah (Chee 2006, p. 12). To the extent that religious education was concerned, the MEC went only as far as to propose for the teaching of Islam to be incorporated into the Malay school curriculum.

It was thus unsurprising that improvements ushered for Malay education and with the rise of the PAP in 1959 witnessed madrasah enrolment waning drastically. Free secondary and university education, support in the forms of bursaries and sponsorships for technical training locally and abroad made available to the Malays, the establishment of Malay medium secondary schools for the first time in 1960 followed by pre-university Malay classes in the following year with emphasis on the teaching of Maths and Science, saw a surge in enrolment into Malay medium schools while madrasah enrolment correspondingly declined. The trend heightened after Singapore's separation from Malaysia in 1965 with the shift in emphasis to English medium academic and technical schools established by the government across all levels as the process of modernization intensified and the economy expanded. Malay parents' response to the government's call to participate in English education, which would give their children better lives ahead and improve their socio-economic mobility further saw the discernible downturn for madrasah enrolment.

By the 1970s, madrasah reached its lowest point and many were forced to close down. Those that survived became largely a

safety net for dropouts from the national schools. Lacking adequate infrastructure and qualified teachers, standards of teaching were inevitably impaired, with ramifications on the quality of asatizah produced. Low salaries further affected the morale of asatizah, many of whom could barely make ends meet and had to juggle jobs to survive. Career progression and opportunities for continuing education for them were also dismal.

Amid the dire state of madrasah and poor welfare of asatizah, Malay political leaders attempted to provide pathways to alleviate the crisis. Driven by the overriding concern to raise the status and relevance of madrasah education and job prospects and salary of its graduates, they urged madrasah stakeholders to broaden religious curriculum by teaching "secular" subjects, even "technical" ones "for suitable jobs relevant to Singapore's development" as "job opportunities can be said to be non-existent for graduates in religious studies" (*Berita Harian*, 19 October 1977, p. 4; *Berita Harian*, 27 December 1982, p. 2). Though laudable such encouragement did little, if at all, to improve madrasah education given scarcity of resources on all fronts compared to the national schools.

It was with the formation of Mendaki in 1982 and strategies it provided for improvements in religious education and asatizah development that saw the beginning of the rise in enrolment in madrasah. While Mendaki's aim was to improve students' performance in the national examinations that will facilitate opportunities for tertiary education as the way forward to uplifting the community's socio-economic lag, strong attention was also given to religious values and teachings deemed vital for the community's holistic development. Mendaki asserted that from an Islamic perspective, education aims at the comprehensive development of the human being in which religious teachings are as important as skills and knowledge for the development of a well-balanced individual able to confront life's challenges and struggles in Singapore's "secular" and "rapidly modernizing" society. A Committee was set up under its directive to make recommendations for the improvement of religious education and asatizah development. Mendaki also established a religious

education unit to focus on religious education planning. While scarcity of relevant data on the fifteen madrasahs that existed then impeded this effort, the Committee nevertheless succeeded in submitting a report which detailed limitations in religious education that needed to be addressed. The report highlighted, among others, the lack of asatizah needed by the community, the negligible pool of graduates (3 per cent) amongst them, their poor salary and absence of career progression.

These findings formed the bases for recommendations aimed at improving the state of religious education and asatizah training and development. Amongst these were the incorporation of "secular" subjects to allow students to pursue "secular" education to the best of their capacity, the expansion of qualified asatizah with better terms of employment and a well-defined salary scale that befitted their status and role, the establishment of a training institute for asatizah that would serve to provide preparatory and continuing developmental religious education training and in specialized religious fields. Such a research and training institute would also prepare asatizah for higher education in religious studies in overseas universities and play a viable role in research and development in the areas of religious teaching and training. Apart from local religious scholars, scholars from Indonesia and Malaysia were to be part of its teaching and research faculty (Mansor 1982, pp. 80–97).

Mendaki's close attention to religious education and asatizah development reflected the strong belief of Malay leaders that the solution to the community's development lag lie in the appreciation and application of Islamic teachings to the social and economic conditions of the community. They asserted that positive values in Islam on education and the Islamic tradition of learning and teaching would inspire the Malays to progress in the right direction. Malay organizations had always argued for the need to incorporate Islamic education which was part of the curriculum in Malay schools, into the curriculum of Malay students in the English stream schools to provide the necessary cultural and moral ballast to the western education system. The training of asatizah to perform this role was thus given close

attention. Mendaki's findings brought to light not only the dismal state of religious education and problems that confronted religious teaching, equally if not more importantly, it drew attention to the need and importance of planning for improvement in the quality of religious teaching and scholarship on religion. However, these recommendations could not take effect partly due to structural issues relating to the powers of Mendaki over religious education and its ability to utilize funds allocated for national educational programmes for religious education.

The Impact of Religious Revivalism

Mendaki's emphasis on the significance of religious values and teachings for the community's progress and the asatizah's role and development in the context of Singapore cannot be isolated from the rise of Islamist revivalism which had begun to make an impact in the region in the 1970s. The co-optation of Islamic based organizations such as Pergas into Mendaki which pushed religious education into the forefront of Malay education, further reflected this influence. By the latter half of the 1980s, the impact of the resurgence had ushered a watershed in madrasah education in the country. From being a safety net for school dropouts, madrasah began to see a turnaround as the preferred school of choice for Muslim parents. In fact, by the 1990s demand for enrolment into full-time madrasah skyrocketed way beyond the capacity of these schools to admit them. This trend was paved by the formal institutionalization of the dual educational pathway introduced into madrasah in the early 1980s which had been initially urged by Malay political leaders but accelerated under the influence of resurgence idealism. Madrasah no longer aimed only to produce clerics but Muslim professionals as well who would have the benefit of an "integrated" educational system. Though some madrasahs had begun allowing their students to sit for the national examinations as private candidates since the late 1970s, the formalization of the dual educational pathway meant that students sat for both the GCE 'O' and 'A' level examinations as well as the religious one within the madrasah

curriculum. While the changing aims of madrasah clearly reflected Malay leaders' aspirations since the 1970s to push for madrasah to introduce "secular" subjects into its curriculum to ensure its survival and employability of its graduates, the resurgence boosted this vision and called for madrasah "to bring out graduates who would excel not only from the secular perspective but also the religious". Madrasah began to be touted by the Malay leaders and the media as providing a more comprehensive and balanced education that can train students who can excel in both forms of knowledge (Noor Aisha 2006).

The resurgence of Islam also witnessed the pervasive discourse against the threat of "secularism" that emanated from the West. In resurgence mode of thought, the West is epitomized by moral relativism, atheism, materialism and other decadent beliefs which undermine the morals, values, identity and worldview of Muslims. Negative attitudes toward western knowledge as secular and the main source of crisis in education in Muslim societies dominated their discourse. Such rhetoric is part of the wider movement that had emerged in the Muslim world against westernization, secularism and science in the name of religion and given rise to corresponding rhetoric centred on "Islamization" or "integration" of knowledge from an "Islamic perspective" in universities offering religious studies in the Muslim world. Their quest for pristine alternative "Islamic systems" deemed divinely ordained has been touted as providing comprehensive solutions to the problems of humanity. Numerical overrepresentation of the Malays compared to the other ethnic groups in a host of social problems including divorce, delinquency, teenage marriage, school dropout, drug addiction and others that constantly featured in discourse on "Malay problems" and Malays' economic lag reinforced fodder for such perspectives. Though these problems were strongly conditioned by historical and structural factors, the strong tendency to resort to "culturalist" paradigms in understanding these problems reinforced the notion that they were caused by the lack of *iman* or faith. Such rhetoric had the effect of boosting the image of madrasah as a safe milieu which would insulate Muslim children and youth against undesirable western or "secular"

influences. This was enhanced by the observance of religious rituals and headscarf for girls within madrasah schooling which had begun to be understood as mandatory in Islam. Moreover, the dual educational pathway also proved popular with parents and students for it allowed them the choice of either pursuing religious studies to become religious clerics and scholars or Muslim professionals. In fact, many enrolled with the aim of being the latter who can compete on equal terms with students from the national schools if not better given their grounding in religious values. Similarly, those who had intended to pursue religious studies but changed their minds later had the option of pursuing "secular" education upon completion.

Strong expectations of the asatizah's social role and contribution to society which were also clearly heightened with the resurgence, further influenced the rising popularity of religious education and propelled interest in higher education in religious studies or knowledge from an "Islamic perspective". Community leaders constantly reiterated their importance as a crucial component of the intellectual leadership of the community equipped at playing a critical role in combating its socio-economic problems. MMOs led by professionals actively sought to win their support and endorsement for programmes aimed at tackling the myriad social problems of the community. While leaders of the religious fraternity have always provided moral guidance to the community, public demand for their contribution escalated in the face of uncertainties in view of unprecedented change and problems of maladjustment seen in those who fell between the cracks of development. Asatizah came to be seen as a beacon for guidance in almost every domain even beyond their traditional fields of specialization and competence. Their appointments on advisory boards and various committees of MMOs dealing with unprecedented matters in areas as diverse as knowledge based economy, Islamic banking and finance, and complex social problems signalled their rising appeal and increasing social expectations placed on them. The constant assertion amongst the asatizah themselves that madrasah education provides students with comprehensive knowledge relevant for this world as well as the hereafter heightened their

appeal. Such assertions further boosted attraction for religious education in madrasah and higher education in religious studies abroad. The proactive public invitation by AMP (Association of Muslim Professionals) in 1992 to collaborate with Pergas in efforts to improve the long term progress of the community, is a classic case in point (Hassan 1992, p. 4).

As a civil society group which positioned itself as a think tank and an alternative leadership to Malay PAP leaders, AMP sought to develop a new social system spearheaded by integration of expertise between "secular" trained professionals and asatizah. Indeed, like many other MMOs, they proactively attempted to collaborate with asatizah whom they regarded as a key component of the AMP's organizational membership and advisory committees which largely consisted of the new class of Malay professionals who had emerged noticeably since the 1980s.

Other Factors

Institutional support for asatizah and madrasah education also facilitated stronger interest in religious studies. The formation of Mendaki as mentioned earlier ushered a new impetus for asatizah and madrasah development. In 1986, Mendaki after a meeting with more than 100 asatizah on 16 November 1985, proposed the formalization of certain schemes to address the issues of asatizah and madrasah development. These included the formation of a Religious Education Unit (RED) in Mendaki, the upgrading of the salary of asatizah and the formation of an advisory board on religious education which would advise on the appointment and training of asatizah (Mohammad Hannan and Irwan Hadi 2018, p. 76). Sidek Saniff, Chair of Mendaki's RED, was reported to have asserted that the unit in Mendaki would be responsible for Islamic education and that this responsibility "was not merely a religious one but a national imperative".

Following the formation of this unit, Mendaki jointly organized a seminar on Islamic education with KGMS in 1989. Attended by 600 participants it ushered the operationalization of sections 87 and 88 of AMLA (Administration Muslim Law Act) which accorded

the power to control the registration and management of religious schools and to approve the curriculum of full-time madrasah. This facilitated standardization of the religious curriculum in madrasah. On 15 September 1990, the Islamic education advisory board proposed by Mendaki was formed, chaired by a mufti. In 1991, it began to administer MOE's annual capitation grants to all full-time madrasahs which started at $20 per student at the primary level, $50 for secondary level and $150 for pre-university level. The quantum has been revised and increased since then. It also offered assistance to students pursuing higher education in religious studies. To help generate funds for improving madrasah, a madrasah fund was launched on 15 October 1994, with contributions from Mendaki and the public. The largest part of the fund (i.e. 65 per cent) was set aside for teachers' salary increment and the rest for improvements to madrasah facilities, scholarships, teacher training and general improvements of the school. For a start, MOE contributed $500,000 while Mendaki $100,000.

The upgrading of the Religious Education Unit to a Department (RED) in 1993 clearly signalled greater attention to asatizah development and madrasah education. A Joint Committee of Madrasah Education was formed comprising Pergas, Mendaki and some senior education members of MOE. The inter-sectorial collaboration was to oversee the review of madrasah curriculum, finance, programmes and asatizah development. The focus of these developmental initiatives for asatizah was primarily to upgrade and professionalize the training of asatizah in religious schools. Though it is unclear if such collaboration with MOE focused specifically on the religious curriculum and the development of asatizah who teach religious studies within the madrasah education system and its actual impact in improving religious education, these initiatives often reported in the Malay media, nevertheless conveyed a promising future of vibrant and positive developments that were taking place in the madrasah education and religious teachers' development. Though the impact of such initiatives was hardly discussed, such positive public assertions further propelled attraction for religious education.

The expansion of the Malay middle class since the late 1980s is also not isolated from the surge towards greater interest and enrolment into religious education including at the tertiary level. Until the 1980s, the percentage of educated Malay professionals was relatively small. The changing class structure of the community since then has witnessed a significant expansion of the middle class though it remains relatively lower than the other ethnic groups. Its rise was due to increasing number of educated Malays since the post-war education reform in 1947, heightened by the government's educational policies and development as well as greater support from self-help groups for the Malays educationally. Such initiatives witnessed improvements in educational achievement and the expansion of the Malay middle class. Data indicate that those who pursued religious studies in institutions of higher learning are predominantly from the lower middle class who were better able to afford their children's religious education. Their growing influence marks a clear shift from the past when many were unable to access educational opportunities abroad due to financial constraints and poor institutional support (Mohammad Hannan and Irwan Hadi 2018, pp. 74–75). Furthermore, despite the relatively higher fees for madrasah as a self-funded private school compared to the national schools, this did not deter enrolment. The greater availability of financial support from the local institutions, private donors, and local and overseas scholarships further contributed to promoting and enhancing entry into this educational trajectory. In June 2020, Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs Masagos Zulkifli announced another initiative to raise funds through an endowment to assist the asatizah. Referred to as Wakaf Masyarakat Singapura (or Singapore Community Endowment) (Shahida Sarhid 2020, p. 1), the endowment aims to fund religious institutions and the development of the asatizah. It is, however, unclear how or in what ways the training of asatizah and religious education will be improved.

With such improvements, madrasah and higher education in religious studies received a boost as witnessed by increasing demand for enrolment and a substantial increase in those

pursuing higher education in Islamic universities abroad. While the dual educational pathway also witnessed madrasah graduates moving on to pursue tertiary education in the polytechnics and subsequently the local or foreign universities that prepare them with knowledge and skills relevant to the demands of industry, strong demand for religious education was also evident. The fact that asatizah do find jobs in MMOs in various capacities not confined to religious teaching and that constant limelight is given to the few amongst them who manage to secure jobs in less common professions such as researchers, further bolstered the misleading notion that religious studies graduates are well-sought after and that their training provided them with skills and knowledge to undertake a host of job opportunities, apart from teaching religion. Such promises of their preparedness do not accurately depict the challenges facing asatizah and Islamic studies graduates.

Implications on Planning for Religious Education

While the government has imposed an annual enrolment cap of 400 students on full-time madrasah enrolment as part of the terms of agreement for madrasah to offer compulsory education since 2003, this policy in itself could not contain the surge in numbers of religious studies graduates. The rationale for this policy was due to the government's concerns for the increasing numbers of students who enrolled into the madrasah and the need for effective planning by stakeholders, congruent with the community's need for religious teachers, scholars and functionaries. Equally pertinent, the government was concerned with the quality of education provided by the madrasah for the national curriculum given the consistent high casualty rate of madrasah students in the national examinations. This, it was feared, would adversely affect the students' ability to compete with and adapt to the social and economic system (Noor Aisha 2006, pp. 77–79). In the words of Goh Chok Tong, Singapore's former Prime Minister, "... if it [madrasah] seeks to train 400, 500, 1000, 2000 ... with religious studies and academic subjects

on top of it, what would happen to the future of the Muslim community?" (*Berita Harian*, 2 May 2000). It was in this context that the cap of 400 was adopted based on the research projection done by an external consultancy research commissioned by Muis. While this policy sought to alleviate potential problems of oversupply of asatizah on job prospects that awaited them when they returned, it had unfortunately not stemmed the tide of students from part-time madrasahs pursuing degree and graduate programmes in religious studies in Islamic universities abroad. Despite the lack of comprehensive data, it can be expected that the numbers studying abroad exceed the official projection given the involvement of major MMOs which facilitate and collaborate with overseas Islamic universities to offer twinning degree programmes. This has compounded the problem of effective planning for religious education including the future of employment of the graduates upon their return. It indicates that the concerns of the government with the employment prospects of madrasah graduates since the 1990s have not been addressed.

Responses as highlighted earlier reveal that many have high expectations of getting jobs in a number of areas including entrepreneurship, media, research, psychology, and social services. This is not unexpected given the dominant discourse on arenas where religious studies graduates can be gainfully employed. In the words of a recent graduate in religious studies from the University of Jordan, who is currently a family development officer in a mosque and simultaneously undertaking a one-year part-time MA in counselling: "I'm trying to venture into other opportunities … there were quite a number of people who were pushing for asatizah to do social work or something related to that. They say that the social work sector needed people who had religious background, and this can be valuable … so that is one area that seems like they need the asatizah" (Interview with Salman Amin, 2019). He also added that: "There are certain skills that are vital for you as an asatizah and they identify counselling skills as the most important skill as an asatizah to make you relevant in a way. So, if let's say you want to venture outside the asatizah fraternity, it's probably between psychology or

counselling" (Interview with Salman Amin, 2019). Indeed, as far back as in 1991, Mohamad Hasbi Hassan—then a senior member of Pergas who later in 2003 became the organization's president—went so far as to assert that asatizah have all along contributed professionally towards resolving social problems such as divorce and drug addiction. Responding to AMP's invitation for asatizah to collaborate with it in this domain and that professional social workers and counsellors would train them through workshops organized by AMP, Hasbi retorted that asatizah trained in theology (*aqidah*) and religious sciences are already well-equipped and have been at the forefront of such services. Hence, they are no longer needed to be "professionalized" by undergoing such training (Mohamad Hasbi Hassan 1992, p. 4).

While these returning graduates are entering the labour market with expectations of being employed in professional domains, the lack of skill sets and competencies relevant to those industries and professions impose barriers to entry. Though the social service sector has been identified as one area where graduates can be gainfully employed, develop themselves professionally and help mitigate the increasing demand for such professionals in handling social problems faced by the community, these graduates lack the necessary prerequisites to pursue professional training as determined by the relevant professional bodies. Though asatizah may well become counsellors, social workers or psychologists if they are interested in these vocations, most are unaware of the rigours and years of retraining and bridging certifications needed both in the theory and practical components of these professions before they can be admitted as a member of these professional bodies which would gain them the ticket to practise professionally. This vital need for retraining and reskilling to facilitate entry into these professions beyond MMOs is less emphasized or discussed. Furthermore, the basic ethical principles of these professions including respect for individual judgment and their empowerment to do so which affect their lives, may well proved to be challenging for theologians steeped in confessional approach to religious studies. Apart from counselling, many also do not really know the kinds of jobs available to them other than working in mosques and

MMOs or teaching religion. As a graduate from IIUM shared: "... They don't really have any idea what they want to be. Probably for those who have ... it's usually the same thing: a counsellor" (Interview with Syafiq, 2019).

Education and Career Guidance Support Services

While students will likely to benefit from specialized educational and career guidance prior to their studies abroad, such a service is not developed. Yet, this is especially pertinent as data for this study reveal that even among those who are pursuing or have completed religious studies, many do not wish to become religious teachers or work in the religious sector. Unsupported by such professional guidance their selection of subjects of study and even choice of universities they enrolled into are not carefully planned though employment prospects, as the data consistently reveal, is their major concern. The lack of understanding the implications of their choice of study on job prospects upon their return abound. For most respondents interviewed, the basis for their selection on where and what they choose to study has little, if at all, to do with the matter of employability. Interviews also reveal that there is hardly any awareness of the dominant religious orientations that pervade these institutions and their impact on learning. Students are also not oriented to the thinking and ideas of prominent scholars prior to their studies abroad.

Respondents shared that some madrasahs organize study tours to Malaysian universities such as USIM, IIUM, UM and UKM in the bid to expose students to options in religious studies or other subject fields in Islamic universities. Many today do study in one of these universities instead of the Middle Eastern counterparts. Pragmatic considerations such as proximity to Singapore and familiarity with common culture and language are often cited as major reasons for selection. However, such efforts undertaken by the madrasah tend to lack professional educational and career guidance support. Students are unaware of the relative strengths and limitations of these institutions in terms of subject fields, medium of instruction and employment prospects. The response

of a graduate in Arabic and communications studies from USIM who is presently a mosque administrator illustrate the point:

> Madrasah Al-Ma'rif brought us for educational trip to all universities in Malaysia. One of the universities that attracted me was USIM—because it was a new university at that time ... the facilities were advanced technologically. I love that kind of environment. Then when I received the brochure, I saw something unique from other universities—Arabic and Communication with Honours (Interview with Siti Zakirah, 2019).

Data for this study also reveal that graduates in disciplines other than Islamic studies where the medium of instruction is in English such as IIUM are better able to secure jobs in the private sector or beyond the MMOs compared to those who graduated in religious studies or where the medium of instruction is Malay. Though the different skill sets they develop from the different universities do tend to make a difference on widening their prospects for employability, madrasahs do not make an assessment of this matter. Some also shared that their madrasah do not have any supporting services for students to plan their educational trajectory. When specifically asked whether the madrasah had provided adequate advisory and supporting schemes to help students plan their educational trajectory, a graduate from Madrasah Aljunied who pursued his undergraduate studies at IIUM responded without reservations: "During my time, I dare say that there was no support at all" (Interview with Syafiq, 2019).

The absence of such educational counselling services extends even to those studying in the Middle East. Responses reflect that for most students, the decision on where to study is conditioned largely by the availability of funding, their seniors' experiences, personal and family consideration or MOUs established between their madrasah or MMOs with those universities. There is hardly any form of educational guidance that would expose students to the diverse tertiary educational institutions, their pedagogy and religious orientations to allow them to make well informed choices. Nor are students adequately aware of the strengths and limitations of these institutions of higher learning within the

wider contexts in which they exist conducive to their intellectual development. Some graduates from madrasah that have MOUs with Middle Eastern universities also shared that they felt compelled or pressured by their schools to pursue education in those institutions. Those who did not want to do so were "somewhat questioned on [their] choice", "marginalized" or "not supported" (Interview with Syafiq, 2019).

The absence of guidance and advice on subject fields for students is yet another recurrent finding from the data. The majority interviewed tend to major in sharia or *fiqh* and theology without any clear idea on whether there is an overconcentration of graduates in these fields. Furthermore, though universities in the Middle East offer a wide range of disciplines other than religious studies, generally graduates do not thoroughly explore these options nor give serious consideration to the potential of enrolling in these disciplines. Very few interviewed specialized in other fields such as Arabic language and literature. Hardly any students admitted into Al-Azhar University or others in the Middle East ventured into any discipline beyond Islamic studies. Out of the forty-nine respondents interviewed, only one who was from the University of Jordan did so. Her switch from Arabic to Sociology was induced by her interest in pursuing the social sciences without compromising acquisition of a strong command of Arabic. Those interviewed maintained that their choice of majors in these fields was conditioned by their own personal preferences and not the result of institutional advice or guidance. It is pertinent to note that these handful of students who did not opt for religious studies in the Middle East have been better able to secure jobs beyond MMOs based on the training and skill sets they have managed to acquire. One is currently employed as a research assistant in NTU while the others are working in private sector agencies in translation services that require good command of Arabic or exposure to the Middle East.

Until recently, Muis did not provide educational and career guidance services that would have assisted religious studies students and others seeking to pursue further studies in other

disciplines in Islamic universities abroad. It was only in 2004 that it established a secretariat to provide assistance to Singaporean students pursuing Islamic education at overseas tertiary institutions in the Middle East. Such assistance, however, was largely confined to orienting freshmen in matters relating to their safety and welfare, living conditions, travel advisory and other procedural and administrative student matters prior to embarkation. While such a service is certainly useful given the weak administrative infrastructure, but the lack of student-centred services compounded by the language barriers there, it does not tantamount to provision of educational or career guidance.

Since June 2016, a Student Career and Welfare Office (SCWO) was established by Muis. According to the website, the task of the SCWO is to "provide key and credible information to students, parents and the public on tertiary institutions overseas that offer Islamic studies and proactively assist students in their professional development".[1] However, detailed information on what the office actually provides is non-existent. There is a lack of clear information as to whether it offers specialized career counselling for students. It is also unclear if the SCWO has a list of accredited universities and the variety of courses and programmes they offer as well as their relative strengths and limitations. Advice on job prospects for students upon completion of study is also not evident. Attempts to obtain such information from relevant stakeholders are not fruitful.

Religious Education and Training of Religious Teachers

The previous chapters revealed that generally many who pursued tertiary religious studies do not aspire to teach religion or become religious scholars, unlike in the past. Survey responses from current students abroad further indicate expectations of greater employment options such as in the helping professions as discussed. The salary scale, perceived limited job prospects for teaching, the lack of calling, and confidence for this vocation

are also additional considerations. The dearth of those pursuing graduate studies in religious sciences that would indicate interest in becoming a scholar of religion is also negligible. Out of 127 graduates who responded to the survey, only three have pursued postgraduate studies.

Those who are teaching, however, encounter difficulties and challenges such as lack of confidence in public speaking, the need to engage with students' concerns and limited opportunities for developing themselves professionally. These challenges are by no means new but reflect longstanding concerns relating to the adequacy of the training of religious teachers. While these are not the only factors, they cannot be isolated from the students' educational experience as well as the extent of support for professional training in pedagogy and philosophy of education.

Studies reveal that with few exceptions, teaching and learning in religious institutions in the Muslim world have remained predominantly traditionalistic and not in sync with developments in critical literacy vital for the cultivation of awareness. Madrasah education, the formative institution where future asatizah are trained, has been evaluated by Muslim reformers as strongly characterized with emphasis on religious knowledge and which warrants no questioning or doubt at the expense of critical inquiry of basic assumptions and doctrines in the search for truth based on perspectives informed by modern knowledge. Submission to the authority of teachers as the provider of knowledge, dogmatic reliance on and memorization of texts at the expense of understanding socio-historical factors conditioning religious thought have been the dominant characteristics of this type of education. The ability to memorize is still generally the expected outcome of religious education which appears to be particularly emphasized in Quranic studies where students are expected to recite and memorize various verses and chapters of the Holy Book. This departs from progressive pedagogy and educational philosophy which puts a premium on the development of critical power of reasoning and judgment, cultivation of the will to think, creativity, democratic ideals and civic consciousness. They are incongruent with traditional modes of learning deemed inimical

to the potential of facilitating the application of religion teachings to alleviate concrete contemporary problems of society. While religious values have the potential of tampering and cushioning the ill effects of change and development and directing its course for the well-being of society, it has been constantly reiterated that this cannot be achieved if religious education promotes dogmatism and over-reliance on medieval religious traditions at the expense of their critical appraisal for relevance informed by contemporary thought. The dominance of such pedagogy in religious education presents even greater challenges as the community becomes more complex and diverse under the impact of change (Azhar 2006, pp. 93–120).

While these problems could be alleviated by progressive approach to education at the tertiary level, generally overseas Islamic colleges they attend are not transformative in this respect. Students' responses consistently reveal that the pedagogy adopted in teaching religious education in Islamic universities abroad, even those that reveal Wahhabi/Salafi orientations or infused with the Islamization of knowledge approach, are not in sync with contemporary educational philosophy and practice that emphasize problem based and student centred learning and the emphasis on participatory culture of learning that empowers the individual with critical skills in appraising knowledge and developing awareness of its impact on concrete problems. These remain generally marginal in the major institutions of religious studies they attend. In the words of a graduate from Al-Azhar which is by no means isolated, "you don't see why Islamic philosophy is right, you just learn they are wrong. … Teaching is never critical thinking. It is just memorisation" (Interview with Badruddin, 2019). Limitations in Arabic language proficiency also appear to affect confidence in communication and ability to participate effectively in classroom discussions that could have contributed to participatory learning. It also impedes confidence in engaging with academic faculty and learning beyond the classroom. Many shared that while their Middle Eastern peers do engage actively with lecturers and *sheiks*, local students generally refrained from such interactions given their lack of versatility in colloquial

Arabic and level of confidence. These problems are aggravated by the dearth of opportunities for development of writing and research skills through continual written assignments or group work projects within the curriculum. In Al-Azhar University, for example, students do not need to write essays or conduct research as part of their continual assessments throughout the four years of study. While some variations exist in the experience of students such as in Jordan universities, generally the lack of adequate skill sets in research and writing pervade. A respondent shared that throughout his four years as a student there, he did not undertake any research paper. In his words, "that's why they don't have much confidence". The problem is compounded by students not even having the benefit of doing the General Paper examinations during their madrasah schooling years which meant that "they wouldn't have had written any proper essay" in the course of their long years of education even till the completion of their BA (Interview with Shamsul Ahmad, 2019).

Furthermore, though the respondents commonly asserted that religious studies in Al-Azhar and Jordan universities are inclusive in so far as they expose students to the variety and diversity of religious ideas and schools of thought within Muslim tradition in specific subject fields, they also shared that some academic staff adopted exclusive views against selected streams of thought or scholarship. In the words of a respondent: "They [the lecturers] are very biased, it's always one sided, narrow argument and not up to date with contemporary times ... it always goes to the era of Muhammad Abduh. ... one time we were discussing Amina Wadud ... her philosophy of women in religion. 'Oh these are all *shaitan* [satan]'..." (Interview with Badruddin, 2019). Though not representative of the general culture of learning in these universities, they reflect the existence of such orientations that are inimical to the promotion of critical learning.

While the older universities such as Al-Azhar in Cairo are well known for its *halaqahs* and *dars* conducted by prominent sheikhs which could potentially enrich learning beyond the formal curriculum, the respondents shared that few partook in these sessions or did so consistently. The demands of the formal

curriculum itself, the struggle with language and comprehension of texts used by the sheikhs, the fact that such sessions are conducted under conditions that are deemed trying to students including technical limitations such as the lack of a functioning audio equipment and timing of lectures conducted at early dawn, deter sustained participation. Ill-prepared for the rigours of such informal learning that students elsewhere have been known to benefit tremendously from, the full potential of the intellectual milieu is not effectively harnessed. Quite apart from the extent of influence from such formal and informal learning, many students are generally not exposed to or failed to immerse themselves in the rich and diverse intellectual tradition in their learning journey abroad. Despite the existence of numerous prominent intellectuals in the Middle East, graduates consistently tended to cite only their own lecturers or Singapore's local religious teachers and clerics when asked to share who they regarded as their intellectual mentors.

These problems confronting impediments to aspirations for teaching religion or becoming religious scholars may well be tampered with sound training in pedagogy informed by progressive philosophy of education. In fact, as far back as in the mid-1980s, Mendaki's report as earlier highlighted, had pointed out this limitation confronting religious studies teachers. It urged the need for the establishment of a centre for research on pedagogy for religious teaching and other programmes for the research and development of asatizah. Mendaki even proposed that the centre be staffed by a pool of scholars from Indonesia and Malaysia given the small number of local scholars then. It also called for continuing and specialized courses in religious education for the development of asatizah much needed for the community's well-being. These, however, did not take off. The lack of such training can be contrasted to the numerous privately established Christian seminaries established for teaching religion. Furthermore, while educators in the mainstream educational institutions have the benefit of specialized training in educational pedagogy for teaching the entire spectrum of students from elementary to tertiary levels, the same does not exist for asatizah interested in

teaching religion. Yet, it is widely acknowledged that learning a subject matter including religion does not facilitate teaching it without the benefit of educational training informed by relevant and progressive pedagogical approaches and perspectives.

Though the community's resources allocated to madrasah education could have potentially been used to support the development of religious education and training of religious teachers who will enhance the religious life of the community, the prospect of such an arrangement has not been amply discussed. Funding has always been cited as a major limitation for the advancement of madrasah including the training of religious teachers and scholars. Yet, it cannot be denied that the limited resources has also been diverted to subsidize the teaching of the national curriculum in madrasah, though this has effectively been provided by the state for all its citizens at no additional costs to the community. Indeed, many who enrolled into the madrasah do not wish to become religious clerics or scholars. This effectively means that the community has been made to bear the costs of the education of this group of students simply because of their personal preference in wanting a madrasah education. Policy-wise, the impact of the madrasah's dual educational pathway inevitably affects resources that could be channelled to be used for the development of professional training of religious teachers and scholars. While intense efforts have been made to rally and harness donations from the community for asatizah, the extent to which these are utilized to improve the nature of religious education given the dominant types discussed in the earlier chapters remain unclear and has not received as much attention as it deserves. In 1994, Muis spearheaded the establishment of *Dana Madrasah* to augment the fund for madrasah education. Continuous efforts have since been undertaken by individual madrasah to support the costs of madrasah education that provides for both curriculum which have become increasingly costly. The support by the community through funding and other means, and the inter-organization collaboration to professionalize asatizah in madrasah are directed at madrasah education and asatizah as a whole and not specifically at religious education itself.

This challenge is compounded by the fact that the term asatizah itself began to be used by community leaders since the 1980s or so, to refer to anyone who has obtained madrasah education even if they then moved on to pursue non-religious studies to become professionals. Though they lacked specialization in religious studies, they are nevertheless referred to as asatizah, merely because they have graduated from a madrasah. The same consideration is extended to those who receive tertiary education in other fields of study from an Islamic university. As a matter of policy, such an understanding requires Muis which oversees madrasah and asatizah development to take on the official responsibility of using the community's resources to support and develop these graduates as a whole irrespective of their personal preference and choice in not pursuing religious education or wanting to become religious teachers and scholars. The opportunity costs resulting from this on the training and research on religious education and teaching are hardly discussed. Equally pertinent, it reinforces the misleading assumption of the community that even those who obtain or return with degrees in non-religious studies such as political science or sociology from an Islamic university such as IIUM and others have the capacity and knowledge to teach and propagate religion as long as they have a basic madrasah education. How this assumption impacts on the quality on religious teaching and understanding for the community as a whole is also hardly discussed.

Concerns over the impact of the dual aims of madrasah education that arose since the debates on compulsory education has remained focused on the madrasah's ability to meet the benchmarks set by the national curriculum. Discourse on its implications on the development of religious education including that of training of religious teachers remains obscured. Though religious education comes under the purview of Malay political leaders and has always been addressed at the community level, even so, the impact of the dual educational pathway on the education of future asatizah and training of religious teachers has not been given much attention. Furthermore, long drawn problems pertaining to lack of revaluation of religious teaching and

learning that had been acknowledged by madrasah stakeholders themselves, have also not been adequately and effectively discussed even during the debates on compulsory education (CE). While madrasah has accepted the demand of the government to satisfy the benchmarks based on the results of the PSLE examinations for its survival (*Straits Times*, 1 April 2000, p. 4), the implications of this decision on the quality and development of religious education which is the basic institution for the training and development of religious teachers have not been much discussed. The formation of the Joint Madrasah System (JMS) on 29 September 2007 headed by Muis which brought together three out of the six full-time madrasahs to collaborate on matters of curriculum and community based funding support did not usher revaluation of the nature of religious education as such. It merely reinstated the status quo in which the community is made to bear the cost of subsidizing the non-religious component of madrasah education (Hussaini 2007, p. 1). About $700,000 of community funds obtained through *zakat* collections were utilized for this purpose in 2008 (Farah Mahamood and Zalman Putra 2018, p. 99). From 2004–7, $1.5 million was spent on training more than 50 per cent of the 222 teachers of full-time madrasahs on the national curriculum for the PSLE.

While the lack of institutional support in terms of thinking and planning for the development of religious studies and its teachers remains, the more recent introduction in October 2018 of International Baccalaureate (IB) for students from Madrasah Aljunied, which is part of JMS, has perhaps further diverted the attention needed on religious studies. By introducing the programme, the madrasah hopes the asatizah can gain wider knowledge and expertise to steer the community when confronted with challenges. Given that IB is a multidisciplinary programme that combines the sciences, arts and humanities, it is quite likely that those in the religious studies track will not be the beneficiaries of this initiative (*Berita Harian*, 9 March 2019, p. 5). It is not clear how the introduction of this new programme into madrasah will further affect allocation of resources for the development of religious studies and religious teachers.

Post 9/11, Contextualizing Islam and ARS

The above discussion reveals the need for serious deliberation, revaluation and planning for religious studies education that can support and facilitate the development of satisfactory condition of life amid rapid social change and cushion its unwarranted adverse impact on society. The extent to which the asatizah's training and skills in religious studies programmes prepare them adequately for jobs that the community leaders promise they can undertake is also highlighted in this chapter. It is undoubted that many initiatives for asatizah development have been introduced by Muis in the last two decades in partnership with other community stakeholders. These were, however, underscored mainly by concerns with the need to contextualize religious teachings amid the rise of radicalism and terrorism in the name of Islam (Mohammad Hannan and Irwan Hadi 2018, p. 78; *Berita Harian*, 15 August 2017, p. 8). While relevant to the security of the country, they do not involve a comprehensive evaluation and planning of religious studies teaching and learning from even the pre-tertiary level that would develop the asatizah's critical perspectives to deal with complex problems and challenges confronting contemporary society and its basic institutions which had evolved from the past. For instance, in 2004, Muis worked closely with asatizah to develop the *Risalah for Building a Singapore Muslim Community of Excellence* which encompassed ten attributes around basic humanitarian values and teachings of Islam for the promotion of the Singapore Muslim Identity. It also undertook a series of initiatives for the "socialisation of a contextualised and progressive Islamic teaching" through the Asatizah Network and Muis Academy in 2004 and 2006, respectively. The former was tasked to "mainstream asatizah by providing impactful leadership within and beyond the Singapore Muslim community", while the latter focused on developing capacity-building programmes for religious leaders. The main aim of the training programmes "was to orientate all asatizah to the socio-religious realities of a multi-racial and multi-religious Singapore and inculcate in them the value of continuous personal and professional development". A series of workshops, immersion programmes, roundtable discussions,

and asatizah masterclasses and seminars were conducted towards this end, mostly targeted at the pool of asatizah graduates from Islamic universities abroad. Muis subsequently collaborated with Pergas to implement the mandatory Asatizah Recognition Scheme (ARS) in 2017 for those who wished to teach religion both in the public and private spheres. A board comprising of senior asatizah was formed with Pergas as the secretariat to evaluate and grant recognition to asatizah for the purpose of registration. Concerns with the threat of religious extremism is no doubt the major backdrop of the ARS. As Muis explained, ARS is "important in order to protect the credibility and professionalism of the asatizah fraternity and safeguard the community against wrong teachings and non-contextualised understanding of Islam" (Mohammad Hannan and Irwan Hadi 2018, p. 83). Former CEO Abdul Razak Maricar further explicated that "there is a need to present contextualised teachings and guard against extreme and exclusive teachings, and of course, problematic teachers" (Mohammad Hannan and Irwan Hadi 2018, p. 83). To further preserve the contextualization of religious teachings, basic values stipulated in the ARS Code of Ethics emphasized social cohesion of Singapore's pluralistic society.

Complementing the objective of the ARS is the component on Continuous Professional Education (CPE). By virtue of CPE, asatizah are compelled to attend full training hours for ARS recognition. The Asatizah Executive Development Programme which is devised for this purpose organize training sessions on topics that include history of Islam in Southeast Asia, law and society, interfaith, Islamic finance and *wakaf*, Islamic ethics, Islam and gender. Much time and resources are also utilized to explain and gain the support of ARS amongst the asatizah which are conducted islandwide and in which more than 1,700 asatizah attended. Though all the programmes are useful in deepening the asatizah's awareness of Islam in context, they do not adequately nor directly address the more fundamental challenge of rethinking and planning religious studies for the well-being of the community in the widest sense and professionalizing asatizah graduates in critical areas they are trained in.

Threat of Arabization

The more recent dominant discourse against Arabization is no less underscored by concerns over the influence of religious extremist ideology in the community and its ramifications. This forms the backdrop of constant reiterations for asatizah studying or returning from the Middle East to be aware of and stem religious teachings that will impede social cohesion. Underlying the discourse on Arabization are grave concerns over the influence of Salafi-Wahhabi puritan religious ideology in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. Critiques contend that it has encroached, threatened and undermined the more assimilative, syncretic Malay culture and "moderate" Islam that have evolved from the region, manifested in harmonious co-existence between Muslims and others. The imprints of dogmatic, exclusive and fanatical religious beliefs that reject age old cultural and religious thought and practices among Muslims as well as promote intolerance of others, are constantly highlighted in this discourse.[2] However, here again, the vital need for planning of religious education imperative to the development of critical awareness and relevant skills has largely not been discussed.

Furthermore, though prudent, the attack against Arabization can compound challenges to the asatizah's development if the Arab world and its religious orientation are reduced to negative essentialism. Though as discussed, some of the centres of religious learning that prevail in the Arab world are indeed predominated by traditionalistic and conservative religious orientations, nevertheless the complexity of the society and diversity of intellectual currents in the Arab world cannot be reduced to simplistic reductive categories. Planning for religious education must include creation of awareness of the strengths and limitations of the learning culture and intellectual affiliation promoted by these institutions and the wider intellectual milieu in which they exist.

Many Arab intellectuals themselves are today confronted with the problems of radicalism and fundamentalism and are combating its serious implications through scholarship and activism in

their own societies which religious studies students can benefit immensely from through serious and constructive engagements. The Arab world has also a long and rich intellectual tradition on diverse aspects of culture, religion and society which has strongly and positively influenced Southeast Asian Islam and Muslims for centuries. Hence, critical exposure to learning and appraising relevant aspects of knowledge from these societies is crucial for the development of religious studies students. Yet data reveal that generally local students' intellectual exposure while studying in the Middle East tend to be highly circumscribed. Most have no knowledge of internationally renowned contemporary scholars in the Arab world within and beyond the domain of religious studies, other than their immediate lecturers or classical scholars. The challenge for those pursuing religious studies there is to increase their exposure to progressive religious thought and discourse relevant to the Malay world. This is imperative in strengthening and improving religious thought and life while simultaneously contributing to the nation's well-being as such exposure are also an antidote to the dangers of parochialism and radical religious ideologies. Religious studies students should be supported and encouraged by relevant stakeholders to develop greater awareness of the variety of intellectual currents and perspectives that exist in the Arab world and critically seek those which are highly pertinent and relevant to the needs of the community and the larger society.

COFA and PCICS

The formation of the Committee on Future Asatizah (COFA) made up of representatives from the religious studies graduate fraternity, professionals, academics and MMO leaders in March 2019 premised on the objective of "developing and strengthening the religious sector", is the most recent effort that promises to tackle the development of religious studies graduates and their career pathway/s and progression. Generally, the schemes and strategies introduced by COFA are contained in ten recommendations

which are too recent to be evaluated for its concrete effects in preparing asatizah for their increasingly diverse roles amid the twenty-first century challenges. As Mohamad Maliki Osman (then Senior Minister of State and Chair of COFA) in his speech at the Committee of Supply Debate in 2019 asserted, asatizah can guide the community in areas as diverse as finance and estate matters, science, medicine, family and demographic changes, changing gender roles and relations, and a host of other challenges posed by technological advancements and new media.

In the bid to step up its plans to professionalize asatizah and strengthen key religious institutions, Muis has introduced the Postgraduate Certificate in Islam in Contemporary Societies (PCICS) in April 2020. PCICS is a mandatory postgraduate certificate programme targeted at returning graduates both in religious studies and other disciplines from Islamic universities who seek to teach religion. It effectively replaces the developmental component of the Islam in Context (ICON) aspect which was hitherto a prerequisite for registration and admission into the Tier 1 category for asatizah under the compulsory ARS. Concerns with the threat of religious radicalism/exclusivism and the need to contextualize religious teachings to suit local social and political contexts continue to underline the programme. In the words of Minister Masagos,

> When our graduates return to Singapore, they are coming from contexts where Muslims are the majority, and Islam is taught to them for that context ... Our special context in Singapore is that we are the minority. There is a need for our returning graduates to be reoriented to how and what is effective for our society in Singapore; not just for the Muslims, but also for us to live with the rest of Singaporeans (Lee 2019, p. B6).

Masagos further explained that as religious studies graduates need to be employed and involved in society beyond the religious sector, the PCICS prepares students with a selection of modules offered by the academy in partnership with local and foreign universities. Examples of these include a range of social sciences, vocational, skills-based as well as Islamic studies modules. Opportunities for

internships, projects and workshops aimed at facilitating their roles in religious and secular sectors are also included in the programme (*Berita Harian*, 1 March 2020, p. 12; *Berita Harian*, 6 June 2020, p. 5). PCICS' formal statement of intent is stipulated on Muis' website as follows:

> The Postgraduate Certificate in Islam in Contemporary Societies (PCICS) aims to nurture a generation of confident, compassionate, and competent professional Asatizah with the requisite knowledge and skills to provide relevant religious guidance in a highly diverse, plural and inter-connected postmodern world. PCICS is based on a holistic curriculum, dedicating ample attention to both religious and the social sciences to develop a critical-creative thinking mindset, alongside equipping our Asatizah with relevant 21st century competencies and professional proficiencies. The curriculum is designed to equip students with a deep familiarity with the current and future contexts of the Singapore society, and Islam and Muslim communities in the Southeast Asian/Nusantara region. Committed to nurturing a passion for lifelong learning and sustainable self-development, this programme promises to be a student-centric experience.[3]

Though the programme is too recent to be appraised objectively, how it stated its aims can be effectively achieved remains unclear. Prior to the introduction of PCICS, workshops and seminars focusing on Islam in Nusantara have long been introduced as part of the developmental component of the ARS. There is lack of information on its impact which warrants the introduction of PCICS. Furthermore, while COFA aims to upgrade the training of asatizah so that they can be eligible for jobs in other helping professions, it is unclear how undertaking introductory modules in counselling and social work instead of other forms of customised assistance for those genuinely interested in these professions, will help overcome barriers faced by asatizah for admission into these professions given their religious education background (Kuchit 2020, p. 8). It is also unclear why graduates should be introduced to compulsory modules like academic writing when the large

majority of asatizah will probably not be undertaking research. More importantly, if asatizah are expected to play a more pertinent role in the community amid the rise of the myriad challenges and problems resulting from the impact of change as constantly reiterated by community leaders themselves, the challenge of planning for religious education right from the madrasah that would develop progressive perspectives on religion needed for their role is crucial. This must surely involve a comprehensive and critical examination of the state of religious studies and necessary planning and support for the development of competent graduates with progressive outlook in the areas they are trained in (*Berita Harian*, 7 August 2019, p. 4).

It has been explicated that religious education has remained predominantly traditionalistic, aloof from multidisciplinary perspectives, theories and concepts informed by the humanities and the social sciences vital for a more objective and informed understanding of the complexities of problems confronting society under the impact of massive and rapid social change. Generally, the philosophy of education and pedagogy of religious teaching in the madrasah and theological colleges abroad do not prepare them effectively to facilitate transformative developments compared to advanced modern institutions of learning. The need to address this challenge for the progress of the community is imperative. While resources needed to draw expertise to examine and contribute to such developments for religious education and training are crucial, this has generally not been given much critical attention. The announcement by Minister Masagos on the proposed creation of *wakaf masyarakat* (community endowment) dedicated towards asatizah development has also not provided clarity on the extent to which the proposed endowment will be devoted to revaluation and effective planning for reform of religious education and asatizah development (Kamarudin 2020, p. 2).

This chapter has attempted to highlight challenges confronting religious studies graduates upon their return. The extent of planning by stakeholders for religious education and the genesis

for the surge in tertiary religious education in Singapore are also discussed. The chapter also touches upon major programmes undertaken by community leaders in the bid to address challenges and problems confronting returning graduates. Gaps particularly in the development of religious education and training of religious teachers are highlighted in charting the way forward.

NOTES

1. See SCWO website, https://www.muis.gov.sg/Student-Career-and-Welfare-Office (accessed 3 December 2020).
2. See, for instance, Rekhi (2004), p. 22; *Straits Times*, 24 May 2015, p. 24; *Straits Times*, 30 June 2017, p. A24; *Straits Times*, 7 August 2017, p. A18; Ghoshal 2016, p. A22; Wanto 2010, p. A27.
3. See PCICS website, https://www.muis.gov.sg/muisacademy/Programmes/PCICS (accessed 3 December 2020).

6

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION, DOMINANT RELIGIOUS ORIENTATIONS AND THEIR IMPACT

Introduction

Dominant religious discourse on Islam promoted and propagated by asatizah in Singapore reflects competing modes of religious thought or perspectives which reveal the extent to which they are able to contextualize religious thought and traditions to the needs of the community and its adaptation to the changing condition of society and its institutions. Though certainly not conclusive, the nature of religious studies education received by graduates in various institutions of learning abroad cannot be overlooked or negated in conditioning their religious outlook and orientations, though these are also by no means static.

Operating in groups that continually compete, align and conflict with one another on issues relating to Islam, the asatizah's

perspectives and outlook on Islam are also impacted by other factors including the state's approach to managing Islam, policies and laws regulating religion in the public sphere, the orientation of dominant groups within the asatizah fraternity, ideological interests for standing and support vis-a-vis the state and the community, the continuing influence of Islamic studies programmes and their intellectual affiliation as well as the influence of religious teachings through new media platforms, among others. These interact with the impact of the dominant nature of Islamic studies education in the formal institutions of learning they have attended throughout the course of their religious education. What they prioritize as significant and give strong attention to at the expense of others that are marginalized, overlooked or negated are functions of their mode of religious thought. The level of abstraction and conceptualization of issues selected, the presence or absence of counter concepts, the nature of their response to and extent of engagement with competing views also manifest in the salient traits of their religious orientations.[1] Given that the asatizah fraternity, especially the dominant groups within it, exerts wide influence on the community and generally command its respect, how and what they think about Islam bear direct implications on its attitudes and responses to the challenges of socio-economic change which has impacted basic social institutions and inevitably the well-being of the larger society.

These dimensions have not, however, been given adequate or critical attention in dominant discourse on asatizah where the overriding focus since 2000 or so has been on the need to adjust religious teachings to challenges affecting the security of the nation. In fact, since the sweep of Muslim religious revivalism in the region from the 1970s, the community's religiosity has come under national attention. Political leaders constantly reiterate that compared to the past, Muslims have become stricter and more rigid in adhering to the tenets and commands of their faith which tend to impede social interaction with others and threaten national integration. The spate of terrorist attacks in the region in the aftermath of 9/11, the arrest of JI operatives in Singapore

shortly thereafter and the recurring detentions of Muslims found to be promoting radical Islamist ideologies since then have but exacerbated such concerns. It has reinforced discourse on the potent ramifications of misguided religious teachings aligned to radical ideologies on the security and social fabric of the nation.

Given this context, asatizah have been called upon by the government to play a more proactive role in the promotion of moderate Islam as an antidote to radicalism and violence. They have been constantly urged to undertake the pertinent challenge of combating radical ideologies, enhance and preserve social cohesion and facilitate the community's adjustment to the pillars of the secular state and pluralistic society. At the same time, concerns have been brewing over their educational socialization in Islamic institutions of learning they attend abroad, particularly in the Middle East. Prevailing reiterations on the need for them to contextualize religious teachings to suit the local context reveal concerns over the suitability of the content of religious education they received abroad to the conditions of the Muslims in Singapore and their potential exposure to radical teachings in the name of Islam. The more recent discourse against Arabization, a phenomenon deemed as threatening the localized, more inclusive and syncretic Islam among Muslims in the country and region is also an extension of this overriding concern. The same thrust underscores the schemes and programmes directed at developing Islamic studies graduates' consciousness of Islam in context upon their return including ARS and PCICS discussed in the previous chapters. Even the plan for the establishment of the Singapore Islamic College announced in 2018 aimed at attracting local students to pursue tertiary Islamic studies in the country is not isolated from this backdrop (*Today Singapore*, 8 March 2018). Beyond the issue of security, the approach of the state has been one that generally leaves matters of Islam to the sole purview of the community's religious leaders for determination albeit subject to laws and policies devised to safeguard social harmony and cohesion for its multi-ethnic, multi-religious society.

Though Islamic studies graduates are strongly urged to contextualize religious teachings to the conditions of Singapore, there remains a lack of critical examination of religious discourse articulated and propagated by dominant groups within its fraternity. The extent to which Islamic studies education and other factors conditioning their religious thought and orientation also remain wanting. Yet the emphasis on contextualization would not serve much purpose if the very thought of the graduates and the extent to which these are shaped by their religious training have not been fully understood and evaluated. The fact that at the national level, religious groups tend either to adopt a passive stance or project themselves as toeing the official line where these are deemed to be necessary or beneficial to their interests, also obscures a better understanding of the actual nature and relevance of their religious thought to the context and needs of the community and country. While the overriding concern with the security of the nation is undeniably imperative, the general lack of critical examination of their religious discourse and its relevance to the needs and conditions of the community and country tend to reduce reiterations for its contextualization to vague assertions that lack concrete substantiation. A critical evaluation of the thinking of dominant asatizah groups' discourse that takes into consideration issues they prioritize and propagate especially within the congregational or community domain and at the national level is especially needed to provide a better understanding of the extent of the relevance of their religious perspectives. How these affect the development and well-being of the community and the larger pluralistic society of which they are an integral part of, beyond issues of security per se, is pertinent to efforts at planning religious education. Yet data reveals that generally concerns relating to Islamic studies education do not go beyond matters relating to administration, module offerings, assessments, organization of classroom teaching, facilities and the extent of use of technology at the expense of critical revaluation of the religious studies curriculum, religious orientations and intellectual affiliation which bear direct ramifications in shaping

the asatizah's mode/s of thought and their implications on the community and society more generally.

This chapter seeks to address this gap. It examines religious discourse promoted by dominant or influential Islamic studies graduates based on their writings, rulings and teachings propagated or articulated via traditional media and online platforms. The latter includes blogs, postings, and more recently podcasts which are today commonly utilized especially by the younger asatizah to disseminate their religious teachings. Data based on responses to interviews conducted with some undergraduates will also be used where relevant. Themes, issues and problems selected and conceived in their teachings and discourse will be analysed as functions of their religious orientations. The extent to which these can be said to facilitate the community's adaptation to the needs and conditions of the society and its satisfactory development and well-being is the overriding concern.

This chapter contends that issues pertaining to Islam and the Muslims articulated by asatizah reflect the interplay between two dominant modes of group thought namely religious traditionalism and revivalism. While commonalities between them prevail in matters of devotion and worship, stark differences are manifested in their perspectives on Islam shaped by specific socio-historical factors.[2] These condition the selection and understanding of religious sources deemed sacrosanct and responses to confronting the challenges and demands of change. While traditionalism functions to preserve the status quo, revivalists' discourse belies a distinct political motif, one intent on eradicating social institutions and bent on imposing what they uphold as Islamic, albeit constrained by operative regulatory policies and laws.[3] This chapter further contends that while there are visible signs of adjustment to the inevitable process of change, these are not accompanied by consistent and systematic revaluation of religious traditions that takes into consideration concrete contexts of their application but more often than not, the result of compelling and unavoidable external pressures. This bears direct ramifications on the extent to which religion can effectively prepare and

facilitate Muslims' adaptation to the context and institutions in which they live. Though not the only factor, planning for Islamic studies education can go a long way towards developing the critical mind and intellectual preparedness in this endeavour beyond purely matters of worship. An education that facilitates adaptation of religious traditions while shunning obscurantist teachings and dogma incongruent with conditions of society is certainly imperative if the asatizah is expected to play the pertinent role in the satisfactory progress of the community and the larger society.

Traditionalism

In Singapore, a dominant type of religious discourse amongst asatizah belie over-reliance on religious thought and traditions formulated in the past in responding to contemporary problems confronting the community. Though signs of accommodation to changing conditions are evident on specific issues, these are often not the product of conscious revaluation of religious tradition that takes into consideration its implications and effects within the concrete operative context and needs of the Muslims in Singapore. Within such a mode of thought, religious discourse remains strongly fixated on personal salvation and the cultivation of individual morality at the expense of the development of social philosophy and its ramifications. Pietistic devotion and matters of worship predominate with the overriding focus on observance of rituals and its permutations, right conduct, matters of sin and punishment, heaven and hell, the prohibited and lawful most of which centre primarily on individual redemption. Theological themes also reveal dichotomy between this world and the afterlife, the need to strike a balance between them with overriding emphasis on hereafter. The overemphasis on savants of the past at the expense of contemporary thinkers also feature starkly in this mode of thought.[4]

In the past, such dominant themes in religious discourse have been largely disseminated through books and the weekly

kemusykilan agama (religious queries) columns in *Berita Harian* contributed by prominent theologians including Syed Abdillah Jufri (b.1938–d.2003), Osman Jantan (b.1937–d.2011) and Ahmad Sonhadji (b.1922–d.2010). Today, most asatizah do not write religious tracts. The few that do continue to focus on similar themes relating to personal devotion and salvation, rituals, and worship intertwined with current issues. Their religious views are also carried in weekly newpaper columns, popular radio programmes dedicated specifically to religion such as the Warna 94.2 FM as well as television programmes and classes organized at mosques, madrasahs and other private spaces. Apart from these, the younger asatizah are availing themselves to alternative media that complements and compete with the established ones to expand their influence in the community. Asatizah are also exploring blogs and other social media platforms which allow for shorter postings and promote less formal and greater interactive modes of teaching that appeal to the younger congregation.

While face to face interactions are not becoming anachronistic, new modes of attracting large audience such as mass public *zikr* are gaining popularity. Organized at venues such as the Singapore Expo, these events cater to tens of thousands of people at one go. Such mass events are today explored by groups such as the Muslim Youth Forum (MYF) to attract larger congregation. Customization of religious programmes targeted at the middle class professionals through new media are also becoming popular. Some mirror entertainment events, peppered with interviews and performances that feature religious songs and music which appeal to younger Muslims. The most recent trend for the graduates is to approach followers through podcasts run by their own radio channels independent of mainstream media that reach out to their followers directly. With COVID-19 hitting the world in early 2020, more asatizah are pushed to engage their audience through such online media. One respondent (ARS certified but did not complete his degree) shared that many opportunities present themselves to Islamic studies graduates keen to venture outside the bureaucracy and NGOs. His company, which produces content via social media

and online streaming, is well patronized by politicians (Interview with Samir Hadi, 2019). Some asatizah social media influencers do not even discuss religious content but network with other professionals on specific issues presented for targeted audience with dosages of Islamic content. However, while modes of transmission of religion are radically changing with technological advancement, slower to change is the predominant mode of religious thinking that belie issues discussing them. Programmes on new media remain centred on matters of devotion, individual spirituality and *fiqh*, though these are presented in a more personalized and interactive manner (Interview with Aminah, 2018).

While such matters remain popular in religious discourse, the social dimensions of religious teachings pertinent to strengthening the well-being of society are eschewed or marginal. The lack of engagement with contemporary problems that transcend beyond individual morality continues to be clearly noticeable today, even though such problems including poverty, inequality, social exclusion, extremism and invasion of morality and many others are highly relevant and constantly debated at the national level. Lack of *iman* at the expense of structural considerations and the need to instil it in the individual is often prescribed as the cause of and emphasized as the solution to a host of social problems besetting the community.

When confronted with contemporary or unprecedented issues that demand religious response, the strong tendency is to cling tenaciously to religious traditions and ideas formulated and transmitted by religious scholars of the past without deliberating their implications within the concrete social frame of reference in which they emerged. Little, if at all, distinction is given to basic religious values and their historical formulations. Nor is there much deliberation on competing traditions on similar issues. Furthermore, scholars of the past tend to be revered at the expense of the present and attempts to revaluate their ideas tend to generate much discomfort or may even be perceived as tantamount to compromising the sacredness of religious teachings itself. Hence, the received tradition is taken in an all or nothing

fashion, cherished without critical appraisal of its impact on the condition of the community and larger society. It is thus that such outlook or perspective on religion has been referred to as traditionalism. This concept should not be confused with tradition which generally refers to the cultural or value systems of a given people for a significant period of their history. While tradition provides a community with a sense of identity and anchorage in navigating the demands of change, the hallmark of traditionalism is the attitude of unwillingness to adapt tradition to changing conditions of society.[5]

Generally, change, when it is accommodated, occurs only in the face of compelling and unavoidable circumstances. Even so, the tendency is to suspend theological rulings or religious tradition using the justification of exigency (*darurah*) which is recognized in Muslim legal methodology at the expense of systematic analysis of religious tradition that takes into consideration the concrete operative contexts of its application and impact on society. Though Islam has strong potentials in preparing the community in the value sphere to adapt to the demands of change for a more satisfactory condition of life, the dominance of rigidity in thinking among asatizah unwarrantedly impedes this potential. Such an attitude fossilizes religious tradition instead of allowing for its development based on new principles in response to new conditions and challenges. Fear that doing so will open the floodgates to the abyss of relativism is not uncommonly cited as justification for non-engagement with competing views or traditions. The problem is aggravated by the ambivalent attitude to reason (*akal*) which though acknowledged as God given is also perceived ambivalently. Making sense of religious teachings to address specific contemporary contextual needs and problems of society and its implications on lives using reason tends to be viewed with discomfort or at times frowned upon. While the emphasis is on application of religious traditions, its impact within a specific context is usually not seriously deliberated.

Though the phenomenon cannot be reduced to religious education per se, it is not an overgeneralization to maintain,

however, that this religious mode of thought is not completely isolated from the impact of dominant type of approach to religious education that proliferates Islamic studies institutions offered by madrasahs and universities in the Muslim world where the thrust and emphasis revolve around transmission of the normative belief system for devotion and practice. Within such an educational milieu, learning is based on texts that are generally unchanging and can be traced to classical sources from medieval times. The overemphasis on the inculcation of devotion through memorization of scriptural textual sources predominates at the expense of critical appraisal of their relevance and application to contemporary problems and contexts. While the study of traditional branches of Islamic knowledge such as theology (*usuluddin*), sharia, jurisprudence (*fiqh*), exegesis (*tafsir*), and Arabic language are given much emphasis, humanities and social sciences are generally absent or not integrated into the religious curriculum. Furthermore, while the use of classical textual tradition are well entrenched, exposure to contemporary Islamic discourse informed by modern multidisciplinary perspectives is generally absent or underdeveloped. The problem is compounded by the dearth of or lack of influence of competing group perspectives and thought within the community.

Fatwa and Muslim Personal Law

The challenge presented by the dominance of traditionalism is particularly evident in asatizah groups' responses to unprecedented issues affecting the community. Though numerous examples prevail, few notable ones illustrate the point and reveal its persistence. The fatwa on organ donation enunciated in 1973 based on medieval theological standpoint on bodily resurrection is a classic case in point. Operative for almost three decades albeit with minor revisions before it was finally revised to permit organ donation, the fatwa caused much irreparable harm to the image of Islam and lives of Muslims in Singapore. Consistent with the traits of traditionalism, the pertinence of the vital need for organ

donation to alleviate human suffering within the society was not seen as a priority. Instead the justifications adduced for the fatwa was based simply on selective interpretation of religious texts formulated in medieval times.[6] As the Fatwa Committee in 1973 enunciated: "there is no clear text or evidence which allows for donations [of organs] ... What we have are only texts that prohibit it."[7] Such justification clearly negated rational deliberation on the relevance of religious traditions that sanctify fundamental humanistic values of Islam in preserving and enriching life made possible with contemporary advancements in scientific knowledge. Competing fatwa decreed by religious scholars in many parts of the Muslim world including Egypt and Malaysia were overlooked in this respect. Even the subsequent suspension of the fatwa decades later was justified on the basis of exigency (*darurah*), instead of a systematic revaluation of texts based on reasoning that places a premium on the basic values of the religion on sacredness of life, alleviation of human suffering and sanctity of charity.

The persistence of traditionalism is telling in the more recent fatwa on joint tenancy which many Muslims in Singapore resort to when they purchase their matrimonial home. Based on the common law, it presumes the right of survivorship of the remaining tenant when the other passes on. In 1998, a fatwa enunciated by Muis declared joint tenancy as incompatible with the *faraid*. Here again, the traits of traditionalism manifests itself in the basis adduced for the fatwa—joint tenancy is not found in Islamic texts. No attempt was made to engage with its compatibility with Islamic values nor consideration for laws and regulations governing sale and purchase of subsidized public housing in which the majority of Muslim and Singaporean families live especially the stringent rules that affect second-time buyers.

Following the fatwa, some Muslim joint tenancy survivors felt morally compelled to sell off their properties and distribute the shares with beneficiaries under the Islamic law of inheritance despite the fact that they were the rightful legal owners of the property based on the common law. Those whose properties were HDB apartments faced even greater hardship in purchasing another

public housing from the state, given specific legal constraints on second-time buyers. Unable to afford another property easily in the "open market" which tends to be relatively more costly, their chances of ensuring a roof over their heads became adversely affected. In its attempt to alleviate the adverse implications of the first fatwa, the fatwa committee decreed another in 2008 with the objective of harmonizing the religious law of faraid and the common law joint tenancy scheme by way of an instrument called *nuzriah*, the purpose of which was to validate the joint tenancy scheme. Though a remote instrument believed to have been practised by a group of Muslims in Hadhramaut in the past, it was nevertheless invoked as the basis and evidence of the religious intent of the joint tenant that his/her property will be vested in the survivor when the other passes on against all other beneficiaries under the faraid. Even at this point, no attempt was made by the Committee to evaluate the compatibility of the joint tenancy with Islamic values and its effects on lives in the specific context of Singapore. Instead, the Committee continued to uphold the strong binary between Islamic law and the common law. Once again the religious leaders took flight to find justifications in medieval texts and practice to justify the existential needs of the community while failing to engage with the operative law and effects of nuzriah on lives. Even after the Court of Appeal put to rest the matter of legality of joint tenancy for Muslims in the case of Shafeeq Salim & Anor v. Fatimah bte Abd Talib (SGCA 11 2010), the nuzriah continued to be promoted by Muis on its website.[8] Problems, however, persisted as Muslims continued to create it to ward off potential disputes by beneficiaries claiming an interest in the estate against the surviving joint tenant, irrespective of the fact that the nuzriah would not stand in case of another dispute in the civil court. While their action illustrate the power of fatwa enunciated by asatizah in conditioning religious understanding amongst Singapore Muslims, it also clearly signified their desire to vary the distribution of their estate in ways they deemed just. Such consideration may not connote a disregard for the faraid but differing perceptions on how the Islamic law should be construed

given the changing conditions of society that affect the realities of how people actually live and plan for their lives in Singapore.

This example also reveals that traditionalists do not reject the national law or demand a different one for Muslims even if they view the law of inheritance as incompatible with joint tenancy. In arriving at their fatwa they resorted only to textual sources and emphasized devotion to them at the expense of their actual effects on lives. It is also evident that the very introduction of the nuzriah, in a way is telling of the attempt on the part of dominant asatizah to make some adjustments to the Islamic law of inheritance in the interest of the well-being of Muslims in contemporary Singapore. It serves as a strong indication of their intent to alleviate the adverse implications of the literal application of the faraid in dealing with the estate of deceased Muslims in contemporary Singapore. However, instead of embracing the joint tenancy scheme on grounds of commonality of principles and values between Islamic law and the common law, the fatwa sought to tamper the faraid by way of remote "Islamic" instrument that is contentious and which incurred hardship. Believed to be practised by some Muslim families in Hadhramaut in the remote past, the instrument cannot be said to be contemporaneous with the times. Apart from its mangled formulation, it has also been asserted by a legal Malaysian expert as alien to Malay legal history and practice.[9]

While the revised fatwa which finally endorsed the joint tenancy scheme in June 2018 without the need for nuzriah was a welcome relief to many Muslims who had opted for the scheme, justifications adduced for the new fatwa were nevertheless not free from inconsistencies that reflect continuities of thinking from the past. Though the Fatwa Committee even invoked the views of past scholars such as Shatibi and other Islamic legal sources and traditions that gave importance to the values of justice and public weal, the imprints of traditionalism remain. The fatwa fell short of engaging with joint tenancy based on clear principles of justice and equity embedded in *maqasid* Sharia. It reiterated the absence of similar instrument in Islam based on medieval legal texts. While the revised fatwa finally endorsed joint tenancy without the need

for nuzriah, the Committee's advice for joint tenants to discuss the arrangement with the deceased's beneficiaries in reaching an amicable settlement creates unnecessary confusion. In the words of the Committee:

> If there are still properties that are not distributed according to *faraid*, the 2019 fatwa can be applied to validate the ownership of the surviving joint tenant in accordance with the law on joint tenancy (right-of-survivorship). However, it is advised for the surviving joint tenant to discuss amicably with the rest of the beneficiaries to find the best way out possible (Office of the Mufti 2019).

The meaning and intent of this statement is unclear as there is no reason in law for the joint tenant to reach an amicable settlement with the faraid beneficiaries given his/her legal right of survivorship. Such an advisory may even give rise to unwarranted problems if the beneficiaries are unable to reach an "amicable settlement". In the absence of clarity and consistency, the fatwa cannot be said to provide a consistent and useful guide for future cases based on sound principles. Instead of facilitating ease, the fatwa may result in unnecessary potential hardship.

This predominant tendency to cling to selective traditions formulated in the past without ample consideration for concrete contextual frame of reference is also evident in related domains of the Muslim personal law which has been the monopoly of traditionalistic asatizah. Here too, the strong tendency to perceive fiqh traditions devised by classical scholars of the past as supra-temporal is evident. Consistent with the traditionalistic type of religious education that overemphasizes conformity to religious beliefs and teachings at the expense of their critical revaluation of their relevance and effects on society, the Muslim law formulated in the past generally continues to be applied despite changing conditions and complexity of society. Evidence of change where they exist are often the result of compelling or unavoidable circumstances with even more serious consequences to the community given the compulsory nature of the law unlike fatwa which is persuasive.

Given this predisposition, amendments to the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA) that administers the Muslim personal law relating to marriage and divorce which binds all Muslims, have been largely confined to matters of administration while slower to adapt is the positive law itself. While the AMLA does not generally codify the Muslim law, the predominance of traditionalism sanctioned the unchanging application of selected rulings of classical scholars of the past, especially from the Shafie school to which the majority of Muslims in Singapore adhere to in dealing with marriage and family relations today. In matters pertaining to marriage and divorce, the laws formulated in the contexts of pre-modern, pre-industrial societies, structurally different from contemporary Malay society, continue to be observed and applied. This exacerbates the misleading presumption that the Muslim law is incompatible with the demands of change and modernization. Suspending the law on the ground of exigency which accords with a principle of Islamic jurisprudence, rather than proactive efforts at revaluating it on the basis of principles amid change is also the common response adopted when change is unavoidable.

The persistence of the law on unrestricted unilateral divorce by husbands (*talak*), while wives must continue to apply for divorce based on specific grounds stipulated in the AMLA or by persuading her husband to release her despite competing traditions within Muslim jurisdictions is a classic case in point. Similarly, the lack of engagement with the law relating to the power of the guardian (*wali*) over the marriage of his daughter reflects similar traits of thought. Although religious traditions stipulate that morally a guardian should obtain his daughter's consent or endorsement, legally, according to the Shafie school, he is not compelled to do so. Although there exist provisions that safeguard daughters from potential violation of their well-being and while in most cases today the consent of the wali has been reduced to a formality, the fact that the law continues to be preserved has not prevented contentious legal disputes. Furthermore, while it is true that case law since the 1980s reveals that judgements

predominantly lean in favour of the daughter's choice of spouse against the wali, judges often invoke public interest—stating that not approving the marriage is averse to society's well-being at the expense of considerations for the rights of women to choose their marriage partner. Even the law on polygamy continues to be applied without much appraisal in ensuring justice to existing wives. While regulatory measures effectively restrict the practice, legally, polygamy is not an independent ground of exit for a wife who chooses to opt out of a polygamous marriage. The same can be said for how the Muslim law of inheritance has been administered irrespective of changing conditions of society. While a Muslim can dispose of his property by a will, the Muslim law which is based on the Shafie ruling on testamentary bequest limits his right to only one-third of the estate and which cannot be made in favour of any of the legal heirs. When there are no male heirs, part of it goes to baitulmal. Sons are entitled to double the share of daughters. The law as interpreted and applied does not permit equal gender distribution of the estate. Its binding effect on Muslims removes any possibility for them—unless with the consent of all beneficiaries or in accordance with specific national laws governing the property—to vary the distribution of the estate according to their wishes and what they consider just or reasonable. Though there are efforts at revaluation of religious tradition on this issue amongst scholars in the region such as Hazarin, Sjadzali, Yahya Harahap and others including theologians who spearheaded the Counter Legal Draft in Indonesia in the effort at keeping Muslim law in tandem with changing Indonesian society, such a discourse, however, is absent among the local asatizah fraternity (Noor Aisha 2019).

The predominance of the attitude has resulted in the incongruence between Muslim law and social change with adverse implications on the well-being of individuals. The lag has become even more stark given the impacts of modernization and democratization in Singapore that have paved the way for greater developments in welfare and rights of citizens irrespective of gender and changing conceptions of marriage and family.

Furthermore, Muslims of Singapore are also not isolated from developments in human rights globally and vibrant changes taking place in the family justice system devised and developed for their non-Muslim counterparts. While the asatizah are constantly urged by the national leaders to contextualize religious teachings to suit the condition of the society, the state's approach to leaving matters of religion including religious law to be determined by dominant religious leaders has perhaps unwarrantedly reinforced the problem of rigidity in their mode of thinking that impede prospect of adaptation. Singapore's standpoint on partial ratification of Article 16 of CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) which provides for the elimination of gender discrimination in the domain of marriage and family relations illustrate the point. While a signatory to CEDAW, it has entered partial reservations to Article 16 based on the need to accommodate Muslim personal laws with marriage, the government justified its standpoint based on respect for the minority Muslim community and the need to maintain the delicate balance of Singapore's multi-religious society. Consistent with its approach to managing the religious affairs of its minority Muslim community, the government has deferred to the dominant officially appointed asatizah for its official standpoint. Given the dominance of religious traditionalism, the prospect for revaluation of the law offered by CEDAW is dim. While there are changes in some areas such as age of marriage or division of matrimonial property where law and judgements are closely verging towards equality, this has been made possible only because changemakers behind those amendments are not from the asatizah fraternity.

While the impact of dominant orientation in religious education of religious leaders is certainly a relevant factor in understanding their mode of thought, the state's approach to managing Islam by leaving matters of religion to be determined by Muslim leaders per se has had the effect of further closing the door to prospect for rethinking the relevance of religious traditions and how they should be applied to meet the needs and conditions

of the community. Admittedly, the state has provided channels which would allow Muslims the right of recourse to the family justice system for all citizens. However, these are confined only to specific areas defined in the AMLA and are not automatically open to other areas. The result is the reinforcement of the status quo which affects the rights of members of the community based on citizenship. Though the government has constantly reiterated the need for asatizah to contextualize religious teachings to render them compatible with Singapore's secular state and pluralistic society, its approach has also created unwarranted effect in this domain, negating the possibility of critical rethinking of the Muslims law transmitted from the past.

Women and Gender Relations

The influence of traditionalism is no less evident in wider religious discourse on gender relations beyond the legal domain. While the asatizah's views on gender roles have seen some changes compared to the past, adapting religious teachings to changing gender roles and expectations of marriage based on common values of companionship, equality, mutual respect, justice, rights and roles consonant with changing conditions of society over the decades, remain wanting. Sermons and writings remain fixated on themes that perpetuate traditional division of gender roles where husbands are providers of families and wives, homemakers and child bearers, irrespective of its incongruence with social reality for many Malay families. There are also clearly numerous sermons and workshops that focus on women as pious wives and mothers rather than the challenges they face in the real world within and beyond the domestic sphere. Allowance for divergence of these "innate" roles is usually restricted to unavoidable exigent or compelling circumstances such as the high costs of living in Singapore that require dual income to sustain the family. The theme of loyalty (*taat*) to her husband continues to take central significance in sermons on a wife's religious obligation, without the same being expected of a husband, whose

obligations is confined to maintaining and protecting his wife and children. A recent sermon via podcast on the topic of "Role and Responsibilities of Wives" conducted by a team of three popular male asatizah illustrates this mode of thinking (*The Talking Dome*, "Tanggungjawab seorang Isteri", 16 March 2020, Ep. 25, Podcast). While the overriding focus is on how to develop long lasting and happy families blessed by God, the central theme that transpired throughout the programme is the need for a wife to be loyal and obedient to her husband. So fundamental is this duty that it can only be averted by her if her husband commands her to perform acts offensive to sharia such as obstructing her from carrying out prayers or making her perform matters prohibited in Islam such as purchasing alcohol for him. Even visiting her parents is subject to his permission unless he withholds it unreasonably in dire circumstances. Such examples are drawn from medieval texts divorced from contemporary condition of life and even from Malay customary tradition whereby husbands traditionally reside in their wives' households. Loyalty is also intertwined with piety, a pious and by extension a loyal wife is seen as one who calms her husband's heart when he sees her; when he decrees, she abides; when he is away, she maintains her religion and looks after his property. Though she can be expected to be angry, a wife should avoid ranting on social media and strive to avoid cracks in her marriage that may invite attention to another and cause her family's destruction. As it is the family that has to be prioritized, a wife needs to know what makes her husband happy. Though some emphasis is given to teamwork and the husband's consideration for her needs, generally the lack of consistent common acknowledgement of mutual support, shared roles and values is evident in traditionalist religious discourse. While occasionally mention is made for the need for communication and even counselling to strengthen relationship, the traditional concept of loyalty of wives to husbands and selection of issues around this ultimate duty is evident. Contemporary issues relating to how a wife's education and employment impact upon traditional marital roles or how changing social conditions have

altered conceptions of marriage and inevitably perceptions of law governing Muslim marriage and divorce as well as inheritance are generally not discussed. Similarly, issues such as marital rape, sexual harassment, equality of treatment in the public sphere, continuing education, political participation and many others seldom, if at all, feature in traditionalist discourse despite their strong relevance to contemporary challenges faced by women.

Even the contributions of women to the religious sphere tend to be generally marginalized or not given sufficient attention irrespective of changing conditions. There seems to be an apparent uneasiness to position women as "ulama" or scholars, despite their contributions in the domain. For example, the three-volume publication titled *Obor Ummah* published by Pergas hardly featured the contributions of female religious teachers. While in the first volume, all the prominent religious teachers featured are males, in the subsequent volumes, male asatizah featured far outnumbered female.

The tendency to assume that women's contributions in the religious sphere are second to men also extends to their role in religious institutions including mosques. In fact, in 2011, *Berita Harian* featured the debate on whether women can be appointed as mosque chairmen (Mohd Maidin Packer 2011, p. 22; Abdul Rahman Basrun 2011, p. 7; Salma 2011, p. 20; Sharifah 2011, p. 20; Muhammad Haniff Hassan 2011, p. 22). The fact that such an issue was raised even though the position is an administrative one, belies the lag. After all women had served in mosque management committees for years. Inevitably it was mooted amongst some that they should take on the helms of mosque administration. This, however, resulted in public outcry and the matter was left at status quo. The issue demonstrates the level of readiness of some asatizah regarding women's role in holding leadership positions in Malay-Muslim Organizations (MMOs) irrespective of the fact that this has already become a norm in many Muslim majority countries. Muslim women have also been appointed to leadership roles in the public domains in this country. Yet the majority of the female asatizah we interviewed for this study felt

that the asatizah profession favours men more than women. For example, a female graduate shared that she is one of the few Mosque Religious Officers (MRO) in Singapore. There are only six female MROs in Singapore in the seventy over mosques. Mosques committees apparently prefer to employ males so that they can lead congregational prayers. The officers' tasks include rostering imams for congregation prayers and organizing dakwah related events. The predominantly male representation in this domain appears to have some negative impacts on female MROs who expressed discomfort when attending meetings with other MROs because they are mostly men (Interview with Nazirah, 2018).

With controversies surrounding even the appointment of women to leadership positions in the administrative sector of religious organizations, one can only expect that engagement with more controversial issues such as whether women can be an imam and lead congregational prayers in mosques would be unthinkable amongst asatizah. The aggressive emotive attacks and adverse comments made against Amina Wadud who had led a congregational Friday prayer in a mosque in America in 2005 by prominent asatizah provide a clear indication of the extent to which the prospect of such rethinking is acceptable among the circle of dominant asatizah. The justifications adduced by them are based solely on selective religious traditions which maintained that such a practice is un-Islamic. There is no engagement with competing traditions and other relevant factors bearing on the issue.

In traditionalist discourse, women continue to be perceived as an object of temptation irrespective of Islamic teachings and values that prize them as equal creations of God. Religious writings and sermons constantly reiterate that a woman must protect or guard her modesty at all times. While modesty as a value in the teachings of Islam is gender neutral and extends to all aspects of life, within such discourse it tends to be confined to women. Even in this respect, the fixation on the appropriateness of her attire that must be in accordance with Islamic tenets, takes centre stage. The dominant standpoint on veiling amongst asatizah when

a girl reaches puberty cannot be isolated from this perception of the feminine sex. Here again, reliance on selective text without engaging competing ones as well as the absence of socio-historical perspectives that can shed insights into the varieties of thought on the practice and how it had evolved not only in Muslim society generally but even in Singapore specifically, is non-existent. The fact that the tudung was not deemed as mandatory by the religious elite in the past and has been considered as such only with the advent of religious revivalism that has swept the region since the 1970s, is generally overlooked. An article written by a prominent local asatizah from the Islamic University of Madinah who pursued his PhD in IIUM (International Islamic University Malaysia) on women and veiling, provides further evidence of this dominant perception. Published on Pergas online journal *Wasat*, the writer states that while there are differences of opinions on whether the headscarf for women is obligatory, he nevertheless insisted that some rulings in the Quran cannot be changed. The opinions of the Egyptian theologian Yusuf Al-Qaradawi are cited heavily to justify this view without taking into consideration competing authorities such as Khaled Abou El Fadl, a prominent legal scholar grounded in both Islamic and modern knowledge or the view of Indonesia's ulama on Quranic exegetes, Quraish Shihab, who has declared that rulings on the hijab are diverse and contextual (Shihab 2006). In the writer's words: The "[u]lama does not prevent any one to interpret Quranic verses especially those with expertise. What needs to be prevented are attempts to dive into the field of Quranic exegesis without adequate knowledge, as declared by Dr Yusof Al-Qaradhawi" (Mohammad Rizhan 2018). Throughout his article, no effort is made at discerning between interpretations of the Quran and the actual verses themselves. Both are assumed as intertwined and cannot be questioned. He even warned that questioning these interpretations may result in the person deviating from the Quran. Compounding the problem is the inability or unwillingness to engage with competing views which are simply rejected using the rhetoric of consensus of scholars (Interview with Samir Hadi, 2018).

While such competing views exist within the circle of local asatizah leaders, their theological standpoint remains marginalized. The dominance of the ideas of their counterparts leaves little space, if at all, for their views to be heard. The problem is exacerbated by the competition at the congregational level for authority as custodians on Islam for the community and fear of backlash and pejorative labelling. This has reinforced the dominant view that *tudung* is mandatory for Muslim girls and integral to her identity as a Muslimah. Divergent views on this issue tends to be expressed behind closed doors and are constrained from being articulated publicly, at times justified as necessary to avoid "confusing" the community.

Such a response clearly fails to provide much needed leadership in matters of religion and leaves no room for diversity of thought while reinforcing sexist stereotypes pertaining to women. It also deprives individuals of understanding distinctions between Islam's eternal values and its cultural expressions in history. It is, in fact, becoming unthinkable and unacceptable to think or state that there are diverse scholarly opinions on veiling. It is also not uncommon today to see more asatizah putting on the *niqab* (the veil that covers the face and only revealing the eyes). Insinuations among members of the asatizah fraternity that the ulama and Muslims of the past are less strict in adhering to the precepts of their faith are not uncommon. According to Uztazah Fadilah, for instance, who asserts that veiling for women is compulsory, the reasons why some women choose not to do so vary but the real issue is the extent of their commitment (*kesungguhan*) to put it on (Interview with Fadilah, 2019). Such a presumption throws doubt on a person's commitment to her faith. It also belies unwarranted assumptions against those whose views on this issue differ on religious grounds and create unwarranted intra-community tensions.

Caricatures of women as an object of temptation that underlie religious discourse are also manifested in the general lacklustre response on the part of asatizah to the incident that erupted in June 2020 involving OKLETSGO podcasts which drew uproar

amongst some members of the community for making sexists and misogynist remarks which objectified women in their programmes. So popular is their podcast that youths, politicians, asatizah, and celebrities have appeared on their shows. Complains about how the owners and their supporters were unapologetic about their comments and their impact surfaced on social media. Despite calls for them to apologize, they did not, until President Halimah Yacob criticized them via a Facebook post. A flurry of comments calling them to apologize followed, including from MMOs and the mufti. Some asatizah tried to bring the matter to a closure saying that the group has apologized, and the public should move on when even OKLETSGO did not take down the problematic posts. More evidently, they did not follow-up with discussions on the need to tackle such issues as sexual harassment and sexist stereotypes directed at women.

Magical Beliefs and Practices

The dominance of traditionalism is also manifested in the ambivalent attitude towards reason in religious discourse. Conflation between religion and irrationality in this mode of religious thought is also not uncommon. Religious teachings and practices reveal an admixture of folk beliefs incongruent with reason that reflect continuities from the past. One emerging area where this conflation is evident is in healing. Whereas previously the agencies at the forefront of such practices were *bomoh* who used magic and charms to heal the sick and other problems, the role is performed today by asatizah who attempt to diagnose a host of physical and psychological problems afflicting those who seek their intervention and prescribe remedies apparently based on Islam which they refer to as *rukyah*, misleadingly equated with Islamic medicine. Going by the stream of advertisements in *Berita Harian* and other social media platforms that promote it, rukyah has become a popular form of healing deemed Islamic within the community because the asatizah practise it using verses from the Quran. The impact of the Malaysian and Indonesian

asatizah rukyah healers cannot be overlooked here. Those who seek this form of remedy suffer a range of psychological as well as physical illnesses. Asatizah rukyah practitioners, however, diagnose these as "disturbances" caused by *jinns* believed to inhabit the human body, afflicting them with a host of illnesses. Their role is to eradicate these spirits using religious texts and chants. We were informed by some asatizah graduates that they were introduced to this practice by prominent religious scholars in Malaysia who themselves practised this form of "Islamic" healing while pursuing their studies in the Middle East. These *ustaz bomoh* were well patronized by the Malaysia ruling elites. One of the female graduates from Al-Azhar shared that she experienced some disturbances when she was studying in Cairo, and how she resorted to such treatment: "In Egypt, there are those who attempt to cast spells on Al-Azhar students, whether they are from Asia or Middle East. These (non-Muslims) believe that if these students are to graduate, they will become preachers in their own countries" (Interview with Siti Dania, 2018).

She related how she encountered a fellow student who experienced hysteria:

> One day, this fellow housemate broke down. She did not want to eat, and was staring at the window. I touched her and she laughed loudly. She was possessed. Many signs demonstrate so: she had stomach upset, she got angry easily, she was lazy and didn't study. All these is because she was possessed by evil spirits (Interview with Siti Dania, 2018).

This respondent also shared that she was also possessed by evil spirits and undertook some courses to cure her of this problem while studying at Al-Azhar University. She explained that the courses were conducted outside the University by Malaysian student bodies. Other Singaporean undergraduates (who have now graduated) also joined such courses. There she met prominent Malaysian preachers who were also well known masters of *rawatan Islam* (Islamic medicine) such as Haron Din, a former PAS spiritual leader. The course she sat for spanned over two

weeks, and she received a certificate upon completion as a mark of recognition of her competence to practise rukyah.

In fact, rukyah is gaining considerable popularity in Singapore and Islamic studies graduates are among those at the forefront of this form of healing. Some of these classes are featured in *Berita Harian*, and advertisements promoting it are published in the newspapers regularly. The fact that Muis has not stopped it reflects the acceptance of this practice. Unfortunately, the impact of rukyah on the community has not been discussed. Few critical writings on it exist which generally highlight its adverse ramifications on health. The practice has been found to delay timely medical treatment which can be dangerous to victims especially those suffering from psychological and mental illnesses. Many prefer to consult these *ustaz* or *bomohs* first because of the belief that they were being *rasuk* or possessed. In her study on the prevalence of magical orientation among Singapore Malay/Muslims and how it impedes necessary treatment for mental illness, Liyana cited many case studies of women suffering from schizophrenia or depression being brought by family members to visit ustaz to seek treatment in the form of rukyah. Given that the level of awareness of medical treatment for mental illness is low, such interventions may compound the problem and pose danger to their health and well-being (Liyana 2018).

The prevalence of rukyah practitioners comprising a segment of asatizah graduates signals their mode of thinking which conflates magic and irrationalism woven into religion to treat the sick. While Muslims perform supplications to seek help and blessings from the Divine as part of faith, this does not tantamount to accepting irrationality as compatible with faith. Succumbing to irrationality in healing promoted by asatizah may even undermine the health and well-being of individuals. It also adversely conditions or reinforces the lack of a scientific orientation to life crucial for constructive adaptation to the changing conditions of society and the demands of the modern world.

Religious Revivalism

Islam as Ad-deen

While religious traditionalism remains a dominant mode of orientation among asatizah graduates, the rise of another distinct mode of religious thought referred to as revivalism amongst them has exacerbated challenges of adapting religious teachings to the demands of Singapore's changing and pluralistic society. Emerging in the 1970s under the impact of immense social, political and economic changes amid intensive industrialization and nation building process, the experience of Islam through bearing continuities from the past, began to reveal strong signs of insecurity and maladaptation. Religious discourse and activism began to be characterized by dogmatic, puritan, and authoritarian traits which also depicted a fixation with forms at the expense of underlying values and principles. However unlike traditionalism, revivalists proclaimed that they embrace modernity while keeping to the faith. In so doing, however, they reconstruct the past for contemporary Muslims based on a selective lineage of theological texts and traditions that depart from the established religious traditions upheld by traditionalists. They also rhetorically call for Muslims to "return to the Quran and Sunnah" which in effect refers to their selective definition of the sacred texts to the exclusion of others. Proponents maintained that Islam is not merely a religion but *ad-deen* which they equate synonymously with "systems" that they deemed as determined by God. As these are believed to be integral to Islam, they mandate their implementation in replacement of existing ones though they are no experts both in Islam and modern knowledge. Given their numerical minority and political emasculation, however, they exempt themselves from this obligation using the devise of minority fiqh advocated by Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, while upholding their belief as an absolute aspect of faith. Central to this thinking is *rukhsah*, the suspension of religious rulings (which they deemed as fixed and immutable) because of the community's minority status in Singapore. To be sure, minority fiqh discourse is popular among

Muslim Brotherhood ideologues in the Middle East such as Yusuf Al-Qaradawi who was based in Al-Azhar University but went into exile in Qatar. Al-Qaradawi's religious views, however, reveal the thinking of minority communities in Europe who are mainly the more recent migrants demanding for separate institutions in the name of Islam which they deemed as integral to their identity. The condition and history of the Muslims in Singapore, the majority of whom are indigenous Malays, however, differ drastically to warrant such demands. Integrated with the evolution of state and social institutions such as the parliamentary system or the political system, they have never regarded these as un-Islamic prior to the resurgence of Islam such that they require them to be exempted from these.

Secularism

Underlying minority fiqh is the assumption that the state's institutions are in conflict with Islam. Revivalist discourse is thus littered with numerous examples of simplistic binary drawn between Islam and the "un-Islamic" or "secular" world in which they live. The negative connotations which they associate the term with are applied to all areas that fall outside their selective definition of Islam. This rhetorical dichotomy underscores and permeates their religious outlook that leaves hardly any areas untouched. They also use the term secularism to refer synonymously to the rejection of God and its ramifications on relativization of values and moral decline which they claimed to be epitomized by the West irrespective of intellectual debates on this issue among Muslim scholars. One of the platforms that manifests this reductive mode of thought is Pergas. Leaders within the organization have openly rejected the principles of secularism and considered it to be in conflict with Islam irrespective of contestations by numerous Muslim scholars. This blanket rejection is stated by Pergas as follows:

> Whatever the form of secularism, whether it be one which totally rejects the role of religion in society, or one which limits it to

> just the moral aspects of society, or one with the purpose of eliminating religion from society, or one which accepts religion to secure harmonious living, it is in principle, conflicting with our understanding of religion (Pergas 2004, pp. 108–9).

Revivalists, however, tolerate what they are unable to change where these are not altogether deemed incompatible with Islam and shift their focus to other priorities "more beneficial" while hoping to make headway when the right opportunity comes along. Interestingly, this group encourages the community to refocus their efforts on civil and commercial matters which are said to benefit the community rather than issues relating to the Islamic state and systems. Their interest in Islamic banking and finance is but part of this "strategy" as are their attempts at integrating Islamic knowledge with modern sciences. Similarly, their call for change from within the Muslim community to make Muslims better believers in a way reflects this understanding, apart from forming the crux of their thought (Noor Aisha 2018a, p. 216).

Religious Practices and Beliefs

In their bid to compete for the monopoly of Islam in defining the authentic Muslim identity for the community, they assert their puritan views on many aspects of religious life especially those pertaining to rituals and matters of devotion which have been the purview of traditionalists. Their fervent insistence on being "practising" Muslims encompass a wide exclusionary ambit of beliefs and observances. For instance, they are intolerant of many established religious and cultural practices they label as aberrations which in their view, undermine the true teachings of Islam. Age old religious practices such as *maulid* celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday, forms of *zikir* or incantations in praise of God, visiting *keramat* or tombs of *wali* (pious savants), and performance of many other rituals they deemed as not in accordance with the teachings of the Quran and Sunnah, litter their discourse. Similarly, they also declare many aspects of Malay *adat* as un-Islamic. Common examples include Malay wedding ceremonies

such as bersanding and other symbols which they maintain reflect Hindu traditions of the past. Traditional Malay dance forms as well as music are also generally discomforting to them. No less fastidious are they on gender interaction and the tudung for girls which they define as compulsory in Islam, integral to faith and not to be subjected to doubt or questioning. Even issues relating to social relations with non-Muslims within Singapore's pluralistic society reveal their fixation with an "authentic" Islamic identity underscored by overtones of exclusivism even if at the end of the day they approve them. For instance, while they establish their preference for greeting non-Muslims on religious occasions, they do not fail to point out that competing traditions exist on this issue. More importantly, the justification they adduced is based on the ground that it is better to do so as Singapore is a multi-racial/religious society. One wonders if Islam was ever experienced by Muslims other than in the context of diversity since its very inception. More recently, revivalists in the bid to out-Islamize competitors in the eyes of the congregation have also joined the bandwagon of conservatives in Malaysia and Indonesia to attack and demonize Shia even though they fall within the fold of Islam and have co-existed and contributed to the religious life of the community throughout Muslim history of the region (Noor Aisha 2019). Some of the graduates who have studied in Al-Azhar University and have been heavily involved with interfaith Inter-Religious Organization ironically harbour prejudices against the Shia. "If there is a marriage between a Sunni and a Shia, their lives can never be reconcilable", said a female religious teacher (Interview with Faridah Noh, 2018). The more puritan standpoint on these issues compared to Muis cannot be isolated from the discourse promoted by dominant groups in neighbouring countries and the Middle East.

Political Motif

Unlike the traditionalist whose quietist apolitical attitude towards the state is evident, revivalists are predisposed to articulate their demands in the public sphere. Pergas' attempts to negotiate with

the government for tudung to be permitted for girls in schools and employment sectors against the policies of the state serve to illustrate the point. In the past they have also voiced disagreements on government initiatives including the establishment of the casino. Their dissent against the appointment of a civil law-trained practitioner as the President of Sharia Court in 1992 and amendments to the AMLA in 1999 that allowed for Muslims to choose the legal forum for settlement of disputes relating to custody of children and determination/division of matrimonial property upon divorce are further examples of their standpoint in the public domain. Here, again, Pergas was one of the major groups which vehemently registered its objections to the proposed amendments. Its major contention was that by giving Muslims the choice to resolve those issues in the High Court would result in weakening the power of the Sharia Court. Underlying assumptions of conflict of principles and values between Muslim and "secular" law were no less evident in the debate irrespective of the long standing interaction between the two systems based on common values (Noor Aisha 2018a).

In these cases, and many others, revivalists are unable to engage with their counterparts using a common language irrespective of their religious persuasion. On the contrary, they employ theology and fiqh rulings to justify their standpoint. Underlying their discourse are suspicions and ambivalence for non-Muslims. Pergas' response to the proposed amendment, for instance, cannot be isolated from anxiety that the Family Court for non-Muslims would award custody to parties who have renounced Islam even though the overriding principle of the common law is no less the paramount welfare or best interest of the child. In fact, prior to the amendment, the Sharia Court and the Board of Appeal had awarded custody orders to mothers despite the fact that evidence were adduced that they were likely to have renounced Islam based on this overriding principle (Report of the Select Committee on the Administration of Muslim Law (Amendment) 1999). Its vehement attack against those who attempted to give Muslims a choice in matters which religious law has adequately and

exclusively provided for as tantamount to a "display of intolerance for the religion itself" provides yet another manifestation of its insecurity (Report of the Select Committee on the Administration of Muslim Law (Amendment) 1999, p. 181). This concern is not only confined to Pergas as "even some asatizah in MUIS opposed the amendments and supported Pergas from behind the scenes" (Mohamed Nawab 2012, p. 7).

Revivalists' insistence on halal requirements and non-contamination in dietary matters in the public domain which has resulted in regulatory surveillance on halal requirements for food operators and other related services such as collection of dishes and dishwashing at hawker centres, provide further examples of their concerns living amid non-Muslims while wanting to embrace modernity. Their adversarial response to bans imposed on certain Muslim evangelist preachers from being invited to Singapore, Muslims' participation in national events and its implications on worship also reveal similar underlying concerns and anxiety which they transpose to the public domain (Azhar 2004).

Group Preservation

While revivalist asatizah attempt to position themselves in the eyes of the congregation and the government as moderate Muslims, they oppose intra-community competing views and resort to marginalize them in the name of Islam. After the attack of 9/11 when numerous Muslim scholars were invited by various governmental bodies and educational institutions to speak on Islam, Pergas sought to reassert its monopoly by insisting that it should be consulted on matters relating to Islam to avoid "confusion" amongst Muslims as the speakers invited were not trained in Islamic sciences and thereby lacked credentials. Derogatory labelling of individuals as "liberal" and "secular" who seek to undermine Islam was evident (Noor Aisha 2016). Polarity and suspicions that belie such assertions cannot be said to contribute to the well-being of the pluralistic Muslim community and the larger society.

In secular Singapore, law and regulations do not permit the conflation of religion and politics and every religion receives

equal treatment. Unlike in neighbouring Malaysia, Indonesia, or some countries in the Middle East, there is no political party in Singapore that claims to represent Islam. All political parties campaign on a secular platform, though the Malay-Muslim leaders on both sides of the political divide occasionally champion issues pertaining to Malays and Muslims. For example, in Singapore, we do not hear of politicians championing for an Islamic state or the implementation of hudud laws (punitive Islamic laws that are mentioned in the Quran that include punishments such as stoning, amputation, or capital punishment). However, voices for hudud as mandatory among asatizah are not uncommon even if these are not accompanied by activism aimed at introducing them. These very groups are also ambivalent about the democratic process maintaining the parliamentary sovereignty is at odds with *syura* which they claimed can only legislate on laws not divinely decreed in the Quran. The clearest indication that it is political circumstances that prevent asatizah from openly lobbying for hudud law is again found in the publication entitled *Moderation in Islam* by Pergas in 2005. Excerpts from the book demonstrate the writers' view that the belief in hudud must not be questioned. Prominent asatizah have also maintained that in the Malay states, the implementation of an Islamic state and Sharia which presumably includes hudud, was stalled only because of colonialism. It proposes that had the Malay rulers continued their rule, an Islamic state might have been established. Pergas' position on hudud is clearly explained in the following excerpt from the book:

> ... many criticise the punishment of cutting off a thief's hands as a violent sentence, without even trying to understand what kind of stealing qualifies for that sentence. What is the philosophy of Islamic laws? Will just stealing a dollar or two, lead to the thief's hands being cut off? ... As hudud is enshrined in the Holy Quran and As-Sunnah, it is compulsory for Muslims, wherever we are, to believe in the sanctity of hudud. Doubting and disputing it may undermine one's *aqidah* (faith) and may lead to apostasy ... (Pergas 2004, pp. 128–29).

Despite overwhelming critiques of hudud and competing debates on its observance in Muslim history and contemporary times as well as the gross lack of understanding of basic legal norms and institutions found in the views expressed, we have not encountered any Islamic studies graduate challenging Pergas' book, or writing a critical appraisal of it. On the contrary, the book has been republished and attempts made to expand its arguments with new examples at the expense of revaluation of the paradigm that forms the basis of their assertions.

Influence from the Region

The discourse on Arabization and concerns expressed by national leaders on the need for asatizah to contextualize Islam to Singapore society tends to suggest that the influence of the revivalist mode of thought amongst asatizah stems from the Middle East. There has been little, if any, critical attention given to the impact of religious studies from universities within the region itself, especially in Malaysia, and to some extent, Brunei, which are seeing increasing enrolment. Yet, data from interviews with current undergraduates in these countries point to worrying trend of the influence of revivalism in their mode of thinking though they cannot be overgeneralized given the limited data. If unchecked through conscious planning, they pave the way for the reinforcement of this dominant type of religious perspective as witnessed in discourse promoted by influential asatizah above. A brief look at some responses of students relating to Islam and the state serves to illustrate the point.

There is a growing number of madrasah students exploring the Sultan Sharif Ali Islamic University (UNISSA) in Brunei as a possible destination for their Islamic studies degree. The majority of the Singapore students studying there had completed their madrasah education in Singapore and shared that Singapore students performed better in the university, owing to their training in the madrasah. They also tended to be more outspoken in class. Unlike in many other Islamic centres of learning, class size is small, with about twenty students in lectures and ten in

tutorials. Universities adopt the strict Shafie school of jurisprudence. Although this is an advantage to them, it remains doubtful whether their understanding of fiqh is one that is able to adapt to the conditions of Singapore society and the demands of the modern world.

Interviews with students reveal their strong support for hudud. They agreed that Sharia penal laws are compulsory and should be implemented in countries where the majority are Muslims. When asked about the permissibility of Muslims to wish Christians "Merry Christmas", they suggested that this should be avoided as such a greeting imply conceding to the Christian faith. They recommended Muslims to wish their non-Muslim friends "Happy Holidays" instead. The students' responses are clearly not isolated from the politicization of Islam in the state since 2014, when the first phase of Sharia law was implemented followed by the second phase in April 2019. During the former, punishments for crimes only included prison sentences or fines. This was subsequently followed by the introduction of caning and amputation for crimes such as rape, adultery, sodomy, robbery and insult in the second phase (*BBC News*, 12 April 2019).

Interviews with undergraduates from Malaysia also reveal similar traits of the revivalist mode of thought. Responses show that many are swayed not only by the Islamization of knowledge paradigm premised on the binary between secular and Islamic knowledge, but also the wider and dominant religious conservatism in the country which the campuses are not isolated from. Since the Islamic resurgence of the 1970s, Malaysia's religious discourse and activism has been strongly characterized by the rise of religious conservatism. The politicization of Islam in the country with the leadership of PAS helmed by theologians since the 1970s and UMNO's Islamization agenda in response to the rise of PAS in the battle for Malay votes, have undoubtedly shored the revivalist fervour. It has witnessed the unprecedented rise of public institutions established in the name of Islam and the expansion of the religious bureaucracy. In 1988, the Constitution was amended which separated the jurisdiction of the civil and

Sharia courts that has ushered endless litigation. Fatwa passed by muftis outside the parliamentary process legislate on areas beyond the limits of Muslim law defined in the Constitution. In 2016, UMNO, which has long rejected PAS' view to establish an Islamic state and implement hudud laws in Kelantan and Terengganu, agreed to strengthen the Sharia Court by raising the maximum punishments for Sharia offence. Furthermore, religious discourse reveals a deepening polarity between Muslims and others and ethnic and religious tensions which have now and again erupted endangering the citizens' rights and lives. The debate on whether non-Muslims can use the term "Allah" (God for Muslims), even though Christians in the country have used the term, especially those living in East Malaysia, burning of churches following this saga and numerous other ethnic and religious tensions illustrate the point.

To what extent are Singaporean students in Malaysia affected by these discourses? It is common knowledge that the universities are not isolated from this trend. In fact, university campuses are known to be heavily politicized. Indeed, many Singapore students we interviewed agreed to the obligation of establishing Sharia and hudud penal codes in a Muslim majority country such as Malaysia. A Singaporean who has lived in Malaysia for three years shared that he followed the Act 355 debates closely and said it is a positive development, because the punishments are currently too light (fines as opposed to jail terms). He gave the example of *khalwat* to illustrate his point of view:

> A person caught for *khalwat* (unmarried couple caught in close proximity) is required to pay fines and then they are freed. They can just go off just like that. They won't be caught or imprisoned. In Malaysia, jail terms for such offences is rare. … rarely would a person who committed a crime under Sharia law be jailed. So this Act 355 amendment is to raise the [punishment] limits so this will be beneficial for the majority of Muslims in Malaysia, so they will be more disciplined … there will be no more rape or incest cases.

His response when asked whether this expansion of powers can be replicated in Singapore further point to his revivalist mode of thought. In his words:

> Our country is made up of non-Muslim majority. Yes, we need to defend Islam by upholding the Sharia. But yet again, we are living under one roof with all the non-Muslims and they are more than us. I'm not saying we have to revolt, since they are controlling us, but then, for certain things to be achieved, we need high level of tolerance, optimum toleration to accept this [reality].

The students also adopted a simplistic approach to understanding hudud law, implying that it will prevent crimes despite unsubstantiated evidence.

The views expressed by these Singaporean students mirror the dominance of religious revivalism in Malaysia. In a survey conducted with 573 Malays in Johor (Johor is a Malaysian state sharing borders with Singapore) in 2017, 75 per cent of the respondents agreed that hudud laws should be applied to Muslims only, while 57 per cent held that hudud laws must be applied to all Malaysians regardless of religion. Furthermore, 91 per cent of the respondents contended that it is acceptable for religious institutions to regulate the lives of Muslims in Malaysia, and 90 per cent agreed that stricter laws and more pious believers are positive developments for the country (Chong et al. 2017).

The Singaporean students are also not shielded from dominant intra-faith issues that exist amongst the religious elite in Malaysia. For instance, most of the Religious Councils have declared Shiism and Ahmadiyah as deviant. Cases of their arrests and detention for practising their faith attest to the prevalence of extremism sanctioned by religious leaders (Mohd Faizal and Tan 2017). Yet before the 1980s, Shiism was considered mainstream by Malaysia's ulama. Though Malaysia is a signatory of the Amman Message, the religious elites in defiance of this declaration have enunciated fatwa to the contrary. Though most students claimed that they were taught to be respectful of Muslims of different sects, many are ambivalent in acknowledging Shia as part of the fold of Islam. Furthermore, most of the debates they partake on diversity of

beliefs centred around theological differences on matters of rituals and their permissibility or otherwise, including congregational prayers and whether imams should read *qunut* prayers (special prayers specific to the Shafie school for morning prayers). Issues pertaining to invasion of human rights, gender relations, religious pluralism, freedom of belief, and other fundamental liberties are hardly discussed or if they are, tend to be negatively dismissed as part of the secular influence. The impact of this trend on the students' educational experience and intellectual affiliation must be seriously examined and evaluated if asatizah can be expected to guide the community in the value sphere and contribute to its progress.

While the examples above indicate the conservative influences on students studying in neighbouring countries, they also provide a window to the trend of thought even for graduate asatizah based on their discourse and sense of issues which we have alluded to earlier. Fatwa proclaimed by Malaysia's religious elites including those that label or denounce competing group thought as "liberal" or "Shia" in the pejorative sense find their way in asatizah's religious discourse here, shoring moral panic against the "threat" they pose to the unity of the ummah. The heightening of resurgence puritan interpretation of Islam centred on the scare of secularism and binary between Islamic and secular knowledge continue to loom large in the discourse promoted by Pergas. While the conflation of religion and politics is absent in Singapore's revivalism, the issues raised reflect similar traits of thought treading carefully within the constraints of regulatory surveillance. The influence of prominent Malaysian academics and scholars such as Professor Syed Naquib Alattas, Muhammad Nur Manuty, Muhammad Kamal Hassan, Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud and many others from IIUM and CASIS based on the Islamization of knowledge paradigm continue to influence local asatizah through formal twining graduate programmes between them and Pergas and Andalus. The ramifications of the binary they adopt between Islam and secularism in all its dimensions penetrate the major themes and outlook of their publications and teaching. Even the works of Egyptian revivalists such as Hassan

al-Banna and Yusuf Al-Qaradawi have been mediated through the Malaysian connection as evident in the book entitled *Moderation in Islam* published by Pergas.

Yet such dichotomy in mode of thinking undermines and impedes efforts at tackling complex societal issues. Equally problematic, it casts doubts on the objectivity of knowledge especially the social sciences simply because such knowledge emerged from the West. The theological dogma that underlies such belief conditions a negative attitude against the social sciences in particular that is fundamental to understanding myriad social problems confronting the community. Such an attitude towards knowledge deemed secular also conditions the view that issues confronting the community must be dealt with by theologians though they are not trained to do so. It is not uncommon today to see professional social workers and counsellors turning towards theologians for solutions to social problems as diverse as domestic violence, drug abuses, mental health issues, and poverty which Islamic studies graduates are expected to resolve with their "Islamic" perspective. This demand is also consistent with the Committee on Future Asatizah (COFA)'s recommendation that asatizah must provide guidance on issues pertaining to technology, medical breakthrough, financial products, biomedical sciences and the internet based on their expertise in religion (Baharudin 2020a).

The resurgence mode of thought much like traditionalism deflects attention from actual problems confronting the community. While religious teachings offer strong potentials to facilitate alleviation of unwarranted problems arising from the impact of change, revivalist and traditionalist outlooks impede this potential. More importantly, it plants the seed for exclusivism and alienation of Muslims, not only from their own competing intellectual tradition, but the larger contributions from others. It also conditions Muslims' ambivalence and impedes them from partaking and developing common institutions based on shared values. Their reservations towards "secular" system breed distrust and misunderstanding even if they are unable to alter these institutions radically. Despite the adverse impact on the well-being and development of the community, the danger posed by

these modes of religious thought will continue unabated in the absence of conscious rational planning for religious education. Critical revaluation of religious education will contribute towards improving religious understanding and using it in ways that can facilitate progress needed by the community. This cannot be achieved without political commitment in engaging with problems of religious thought and education in an inclusive manner. An approach of non-interference in matters of religion unless it serves the interest of the state or result in conflict will not suffice and may even reinforce the problem.

NOTES

1. See Mannheim (1936) for a discussion of the modes on thought.
2. For some insights into these factors, refer to Azar Ibrahim (2014), chapters 1–3. See also Noor Aisha (2018a).
3. For a deeper understanding of the traits of this mode of religious thought amongst the Malays, see Shaharuddin Maaruf (2005).
4. For deeper insights into this mode of thought amongst the Malays, see Alatas (2015); Azhar (2014), pp. 91–120.
5. For a discussion on the distinction between tradition and traditionalism, see Shaharuddin (1992).
6. See the debates on this issue by Alatas (2015).
7. Lampiran Surat Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura pada akhbar bertarikh 1 Ogos 1973. Cited in Alatas (2015), p. 3.
8. The Court of Appeal in that case ruled that while Section 112(1) of the AMLA binds Muslims, joint tenancy is concerned with the distribution of the estate of a Muslim person and not with the determination of the assets that constitute the estate. This was to be made under the common law and not Muslim law. When the land in question is not part of the estate, the right of survivorship in the joint tenancy is applied. The court also commented that the fatwa of Muis was inconsistent with the general law.
9. See the judgement in the case of Mohamed Ismail bin Ibrahim v Mohammad Taha bin Ibrahim, 4 SLR 756 (2004). For more discussions on the issue of *nuzriah* and joint tenancy, see Noor Aisha (2019).

7

CONCLUSION

While asatizah have historically played a significant role in the community in matters of faith and worship, the demands and impact of rapid change which have affected basic social institutions have witnessed their growing influence in society extending beyond these traditional domains. Uncertainties in response to change and the rise of a host of social and economic challenges affecting the community in the process of development have witnessed their growing influence for guidance and remedy. At the same time, strong signs of insecurity have also conditioned the nature of religious experience of Muslims, revealing signs of conservatism and utopian streaks that threatened and impeded the well-being of society. Asatizah, the people responsible for teaching the religion, perpetuating the religious tradition and protecting religious identity are thus seen to be significant in strengthening the potential role and contributions of religion towards improving the condition of life.

Until the last two decades, discourses on the needs and development of asatizah have been largely confined to the

community level. The rise of religious revivalism in the region since the 1970s compounded by violence and terrorism in the name of Islam that have emerged in the region shortly after 9/11 and its ramification on Singapore, have ushered greater spotlight on Muslims' religiosity at the national level. Asatizah, in particular the Islamic studies graduates, who at present formed the core of the asatizah community, have inevitably been the subject of much attention in dominant discourse. Highlighted by Singapore's leaders as one of the three vital pillars of the Malay/Muslim community, alongside the professionals and entrepreneurs, they have been said to play a highly pertinent role in contributing to harmony and social cohesion of Singapore's pluralistic society. Not only are they expected to provide guidance to the community in areas as broad as scientific developments, demographic changes and social problems experienced by those who fall between the cracks, their role in safeguarding the nation against extremism and violence in the name of Islam that threatens the security of the nation has also been constantly reiterated. At the same time, asatizah are also constantly urged to contextualize and promote religious teachings conducive to Singapore's pluralistic society. However, the discourse has not been accompanied by systematic and critical attention to planning for religious education that is progressive and meaningful for change, if at all. Problems and challenges of job prospects and progression for asatizah to teach religion upon their return have also not been the focus of critical attention though programmes aimed at creating awareness of Islam in context and exposing them to other helping professions have been initiated. These are, however, not aimed at revaluation of religious education as a discipline and planning for change. Yet, its pertinence cannot be overlooked given the increasing numbers of returning religious studies graduates from institutions of higher learning abroad.

It is not the aim of this book to provide a blueprint for reform in religious education. The book seeks to examine the nature of dominant Islamic education received by Singapore's asatizah from universities and colleges abroad and their relevance in preparing

asatizah for the challenges of the modern world. The kinds of intellectual exposure and affiliation of asatizah within and beyond their formal learning and the ramifications of these on their religious orientations and discourse are also examined. How these factors condition their sense of issues and their implications on the progress and well-being of the community and larger society are also analysed. This book also identifies the factors that condition the proliferation of Islamic studies graduates in Singapore, the nature and extent of support graduates receive from stakeholders prior to, in the course of, and upon their return abroad. The overriding aim is to emphasize the need for adequate and effective planning for religious education, one that is anchored in the cultural tradition of the community, integrated with universal philosophy and relevant modern knowledge vital in developing awareness of contemporary problems and tackling their implications. Given the lack of accessibility and dearth of available data on asatizah, the study utilized data obtained based on questionnaire, focus group discussions and in-depth interviews conducted with asatizah graduates and undergraduates. While the data is not comprehensive and findings cannot be overgeneralized, they nevertheless provide an important starting point towards a better understanding of the subject matter and insights into the issues highlighted.

The book fills lacunae in the death of research on Islamic religious education where the overriding focus has been largely confined to madrasah education and security considerations, much of the latter of which have been produced by asatizah themselves in support of the government's counter-terrorism project. The book will be useful to policymakers and stakeholders involved in the planning of religious education and training of asatizah necessary for the well-being of the society. While Muis has initiated training programmes for asatizah following the recommendations of the Committee on Future Asatizah (COFA) which was established with the support of the government to professionalize asatizah, these efforts and initiatives do not focus on revaluation of religious education nor the development of religious teachers and

scholars through professional educational training and retraining. The overriding concerns of these initiatives as explicated centre on the need for asatizah to contextualize religious teachings at the individual level and provide exposure to new areas such as counselling and social work for potential employment and reskilling, among others.

This study reveals the strong interplay of the salient traits of religious traditionalism and revivalism in dominant religious discourse promoted by graduate asatizah. While not the only factor, the nature of religious education received by graduate asatizah cannot be dismissed in shaping such modes of thought which influence the asatizah's sense of issues including problems raised, how they are conceived, the kinds of solutions offered as well as those concerns that are overlooked or negated though these have received much critical attention in contemporary debates on the problems of society. Strong imprints of these modes of thought are evident in the fixations on matters of worship and personal salvation in religious discourse at the expense of social philosophy and its relevance to contemporary challenges, ambivalence towards adapting and synthesizing religious traditions to concrete problems while assimilating relevant modern knowledge as evident in numerous *fatwas* and the Muslim law upheld. Similarly, their discourse on gender, attitude towards secularism and social institutions including the parliamentary system of government as well as their rhetoric on the Islamic state, hudud and "Islamic" systems illustrate the point. While the medium they utilized, such as social media, podcasts, and blogs are modern, generally their discourse reveals the inability to articulate issues beyond the language of theology and *fiqh* without ample consideration for their relevance to and implications on problems within a concrete social context. This limits the relevance of religious values and teachings towards improving the condition of life.

While religious education is certainly not the sole factor for the dominance of such orientations amongst asatizah, this study maintains that years of exposure to particular types of religious education systems, their nature and the orientations that dominate

cannot be overlooked. To that extent the study provides an overview of the dominant religious orientations that pervade the landscape of Islamic studies centres of learning, especially the major universities that the local asatizah have graduated from. Amongst these are Al-Azhar Univeristy in Egypt and others in Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Malaysia which have remained influential even for the majority of Singapore's current religious studies undergraduates. Essentially three well-patronized ones are highlighted and discussed. Though non-monolithic in terms of the political contexts in which they reside and socio-historical factors that influence their affiliation and direction, they are characterized by the same confessional approach to the study of Islam in which the basis of devising the entire curriculum and content is conditioned by the believers' faith. While most have up-to-date "modern" facilities, their religious outlook cannot be said to imbibe the modern spirit of critical inquiry. On the contrary, traditionalistic and conservative orientations prevail with implications on modes of teaching and learning. While devotional aspects are emphasized based on medieval sources, philosophy, literature and the social sciences are not integrated into the curriculum and are generally deemed as "western", "secular" or incompatible with Islam. Memorization of texts at the expense of contextual interpretations, critical thinking, research and writing formed the dominant pedagogical style. While Al-Azhar University, which prides itself as a premier university in religious studies education, remains dominant, its culture of learning venerates textual tradition at the expense of rationalistic sources with a marked focus on the teaching of *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and theology.

The emergence of religious resurgence accompanied by the revivalist mode of thinking characterized by a religious experience that is distinctly anti-western and anti-secular in its rhetoric and the quest for comprehensive Islamic order that challenges existing ones as secular, western or un-Islamic, has also penetrated the domain of education not confined to religious studies in the Muslim world. Amongst these are the Malaysian universities namely IIUM and others well patronized by asatizah, where Islamization of knowledge

paradigm conditions the teaching of religious subjects as well as modern social science disciplines. Less emphasis is given to learning classical texts but more on the study of "authentic" Quran and Hadith as defined by the dominant group. The paradigm is not isolated from the fervour for political Islam starkly accompanied by euphoria for the implementation of Sharia and hudud. The strong polarity which they uphold between Islam and the West and their exclusivist outlook is evident in their attitude against pluralism, gender equality, human rights, and critical approaches in reading religious texts. This outlook penetrates the teaching of disciplines beyond religious studies including the natural sciences, law, economics, politics, psychology and even literature which bear inevitable repercussions on the mode of thought and discourse of Singapore's asatizah. While graduates from the universities in Malaysia tend to have more opportunities for employment beyond the religious sector in Singapore due to the use of English and Arabic as the medium of instruction (such as in IIUM), the prevalence of exclusivist discourse within the campuses is evident given the impact of the conflation of religion and politics. Like their Middle Eastern counterparts, asatizah graduates and current students' exposure to the wide spectrum of Islamic intellectual tradition and contemporary thought, including in the Malay world, is not well developed.

Universities in Saudi Arabia and Gulf states also attract local asatizah not least for their lucrative scholarships and lack of barriers for entry. The influence of the austere Salafi-Wahhabi orientation traced to the founder Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab, and which prioritize the teachings of Ibn Taymiyyah and Hanbali school of thought at the expense of others permeate the religious studies curriculum. Furthermore, the study of hadith rather than *fiqh* (legal), and doctrinal formulations fixated only on the Quran and hadith without the inclusion of theology, and *tasawuf* or mystical tradition of Islam are taught. The literal reading of texts, supplemented with hadith sources, is the dominant pedagogical style. This orientation is averse to local customs and inherited tradition which are deemed as *bid'ah* (innovation) and a corruption

of authentic Islam. Graduates tend to be "hardliners", non-tolerant of age old religious traditions and customs, and who insist on strict observations of social and personal conduct in the public sphere. They also denounce Shia. Such religious studies education has no place for the social sciences. While asatizah studying in Saudi Arabian universities do reveal signs of this exclusive orientation upon their return which has resulted in intra-community tension, those interviewed revealed a shift in mode of thought over time. Nonetheless, their puritanical influence cannot be simply dismissed given their vocal assertiveness against age old practices and customs which has caused anxiety among mainstream Muslims, including Sufi circles and progressive groups.

While the Indonesian State Islamic Universities (Universitas Islam Negeri or UIN), especially the Jakarta and Jogjakarta branches, differ drastically having spearheaded institutional reforms which integrate Islamic and Western intellectual traditions and social sciences and other branches of modern knowledge into the Islamic studies curriculum and discourse, local asatizah are generally not enrolled into these universities. The lack of exposure to the intellectual tradition and thought of Indonesian intellectuals such as Nurcholish Madjid, Ahmad Syafii Maarif, Azyumardi Azra, Moeslim Abdurahman, Amin Abdullah, Quraish Shihab and Aqil Siradj and numerous others is starkly evident. Their discourse on pluralism, human rights, democracy, religious educational reform, secularism, Sharia, reformist thought and tradition in Nusantara and many other pertinent themes are absent in the religious discourse of the local asatizah community. Generally, the Singapore religious discourse reveal strong elements of revivalism that mirror their counterparts in Malaysia with the centrality of sharia and hudud as integral to faith and the fixation for alternative Islamic systems or order in place of existing institutions. The interplay between such mode of thought with traditionalist fixation on devotion and piety at the expense of engagement with social issues informed by progressive social philosophy is stark.

Data also revealed that to a large extent informal learning and engagement within and beyond the classroom with academic

faculty, students from host countries or from the Middle East through students' associations or informal learning circles, are negligible or hardly exist. Graduates tend to interact more with their own fellow Singaporean asatizah and those from Malaysia at the expense of others. While they are generally not involved in and do not keep up with political developments of the countries of study, they are also not exposed to intellectual current and progressive Middle Eastern contemporary scholars in their respective fields of study within the wider intellectual milieu beyond that of their immediate lecturers.

This study also reveals that while the majority of the students gravitate to such selected universities, the role of academic counselling by relevant stakeholders that takes into consideration their dominant orientations and intellectual affiliation as well as how these affect curriculum and pedagogy are generally absent. For many, their choices of where and what to study are determined by dominant trends, perceptions of the reputation of the universities, availability of scholarships or funding support, modern physical infrastructure and organization, influence of madrasah teachers, peers and social circles. Little if any consideration is given to understanding the impact of the traditionalistic or revivalist strands and ideology or their dominant confessional approach that prevails in these institutions. The extent to which the education system emphasizes revaluation of texts to the context of modern society, or expose them to the variety of contemporary religious thought of progressive scholars as well as multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives from the social sciences and humanities are also starkly absent in their consideration.

Reaching for the Crescent?

A major finding of this book is that graduates have strong reservations about becoming religious teachers when they returned to Singapore. Prospects for employment in this sector as well as lack of confidence and fear of their suitability for the vocation which they deemed as challenging are some of the

major responses of asatizah that impede interest in this sector. While they have been advised by stakeholders to explore online platforms and digital media, not many have been successful. The COVID-19 pandemic has also demonstrated that going online to teach religion is not without its challenges for local asatizah since they now have to compete with the international and regional asatizah, ulama and popular preachers, who are digital savvy. The eloquence and charismatic preachers from Malaysia, who also captures the Singapore Malay/Muslim market stand to compete in this market in teaching religion. Furthermore, their educational experience has also severely limited their potential as good educators. Unlike the case of Indonesia, whereby the primary objective of studying Islamic studies is to be theologians or religious teachers, Singaporean students have deviated from this objective. The narrative that they have the capacity to venture into non-religious domains after graduation may have strongly influenced this expectation. The book also reveals the absence of institutional support needed for the training of religious teachers comparable to Christian seminaries or the national training institute developed for the training of teachers from the national schools. While there had been such a proposal by Mendaki in the early 1980s, this did not take off.

Despite their training in the discipline of religious studies, the majority including undergraduates express the preference to work in non-religious sectors. They stated that with their religious studies degrees, they can transition into medicine, the sciences, and IT. Some also harbour aspirations of venturing into the civil service as policymakers and researchers. They also shared that they have been advised to explore other professions such as counselling and social work. It is evident that such expectations have been impressed upon them by Malay political leaders and key stakeholders who constantly reiterate that they are able to make this transition. Programmes such as the Postgraduate Certificate in Islam in Contemporary Societies (PCICS) also include such introductory modules with the aim of exposing students to this possibility. Graduates who failed to get jobs upon their return to

Singapore have also been advised to upgrade themselves and adopt a "mindset" shift. Yet this study reveals that their awareness of the relevant qualifications needed for entry into such professions is lacking.

The reality of the matter is that employability is a serious concern for undergraduates and graduates. Coupled with this is the constant complain by the graduates of their low salary scale in teaching and administrative positions they perform in mosques and other religious institutions, which forced them to undertake odd jobs or venture into the gig economy. Yet planning for their employability and integration into workforce remains wanting. There are also impediments of entry in certain employment services and sectors that graduates can enter by virtue of their degree. Bridging programmes that would allow them entry into the competitive workforce are much needed though such support appears lacking. However, there are no shortcuts regarding training and equipping graduates with relevant skills. Without relevant skills, barriers to entry into professional careers remain a major challenge.

To date, there is no clear official data on the adequacy of the supply of asatizah in relation to the needs of the community. While the government has imposed a cap on enrolment on madrasah intake to 400 annually following the debates on compulsory education in the late 1990s based on projected needs of religious teachers for the community, there are a number of factors that suggest that the actual numbers far exceed this figure. The proliferation of twinning degree programmes organized by Malay-Muslim Organizations (MMOs) such as Pergas, Andalus and Muhammadiyah among others in collaboration with regional universities such as the IIUM and other private Indonesian Islamic universities, the availability of other routes such as enrolment into foundation programmes in neighbouring countries before moving on to universities in the Middle East as well as others including studying in Saudi Arabia which do not require religious studies educational background for entry, offer indications that the cap does not reflect actual supply of asatizah graduates relative to

the needs of the community. This study further reveals that the students' motivations for subject specialization are also not based on academic counselling by relevant stakeholders which may have implications on prospects for employment. The majority of students tend to read Sharia and/or theology at the expense of other subjects including Arabic or even other fields of study though most Middle Eastern universities offer an array of social science disciplines.

The surge in demand for religious studies education abroad which has propelled the rise in the number of asatizah graduates is conditioned by a number of factors as this study revealed. Of these, perhaps the most potent is the influence of religious revivalism. The phenomenon with its rejection of secularism has shore interest for religious studies and the lure of the need for Islamization of knowledge as an alternative paradigm which has witnessed the growing numbers of asatizah graduates from universities that promote this binary view of knowledge and the world. The phenomenon has also given rise to the rhetoric that asatizah are equipped with the best of both worldly and other worldly knowledge to undertake the task of developing the community and insulating it from the adverse impact of the West and safeguard its Muslim identify against threat and corruption. Other factors including greater affordability with the changing social structure of the community, lack of opportunity for entry into the national tertiary educational institutions upon completion of madrasah education as well as the availability of twinning and bridging programmes within and beyond the country, have also spurred the surge in demand for religious education.

Without attempting to overgeneralize, this study also found that while the dominant focus of attention has been on the influence of Arabization on religious studies graduates in the Middle East manifested in the radicalized, puritan, Salafi-Wahhabi Islam incongruent with the syncretic or "moderate" religious experience that had evolved from the region, the impact of revivalism from neighbouring Malaysia is in fact more worrying. Indeed, discourse of dominant asatizah clearly reveals topics

and lineage of authorities that strongly mirror those advocated by revivalist groups in neighbouring Malaysia. Issues on the centrality of hudud and sharia (as defined by proponents) to faith, attitude towards secularism, Islamic state, parliamentary system, Muslim-non-Muslim relations and numerous others can be traced pronouncedly to Malaysian Islamist ideologues. While Middle Eastern Islamists such as Sayyid Qutb, Yusuf Al-Qaradawi and others are also cited, the ideas of these personalities have been mediated through Malaysia's revivalist networks. Furthermore, at the social level, students studying in the Middle East are also more closely connected with Malaysian students, and Indonesians to some extent, rather than their Middle Eastern peers. Their intellectual affiliation lies more with the Malaysian scholars than the Indonesian scholars, although they are not connected with the Malay-Indonesian intellectual tradition characterized by intellectuals such as Syed Hussein Alatas, Chandra Muzaffar, Nurcholish Madjid, Abdurrahman Wahid or Quraish Shihab. Their current religious views are influenced by the Malaysian paradigm of Islamization of knowledge. In fact, a number of graduates interviewed from the Middle East universities are exploring/have joined MA programmes from Malaysian universities instead of continuing in their alma mater. The study also found that while concerns with integration of religious thought to Singapore's context are constantly highlighted in dominant discourse, male Islamic studies graduates are not enlisted into compulsory national service all these years until recently. Such an opportunity extended to them may have contributed to forging common experience with other Singaporeans vital for integration.

The Islamic Studies Training that Singapore Needs

This finding reveals the critical need for a type of Islamic studies that need to be developed for Singapore's asatizah taking into consideration its multiracial, urban and global settings. Ultimately, there is a need to revaluate the dominant types of Islamic studies education offered in the major universities attended by the local asatizah. The dominant religious orientations that pervade in these

universities, their intellectual affiliation and impact on the asatizah's mode of thinking, have been rarely discussed, if at all. A critical appraisal of the dominant nature of religious education would serve as an important starting point for planning effectively for reform in religious education as a whole, including pre-tertiary madrasah education. Such a review of religious education is indeed necessary as it sheds insights into the training of prospective religious teachers and scholars. The nature of religious education offered by private religious institutions, which have become the alternative pathways for one to become an asatizah, also needs to be scrutinized, more so as they do not fall under the ambit of Muis. In the era of globalization and new media, Islamic universities or institutions will no longer have sole monopoly in teaching religion. However, the development of critical perspectives of asatizah through reforms in dominant religious education will be the surest safeguard against exclusivist, conservative, traditionalist, and revivalist tendencies in society.

The conclusions of this book would assist us in reflecting seriously on the possible types of Islamic studies leanings that are relevant and imperative for our context. Without going into details, highlighting some important features of Islamic studies education that are clearly needed today is necessary. Islamic studies should: (a) provide a balanced training in both the theological dimensions of the religion inasmuch as it addresses, and is attuned to, contemporary realities; and (b) multidisciplinary training which gives vital exposure for its graduates. This means (c) a discipline of studies where religious sciences blend creatively with social sciences and philosophy or other branches of humanities. Moreover, (d) the coverage in the religious sciences should be inclusive and diverse of the Islamic traditions be it from the past and present, including (e) critical exposure to contemporary challenges on society's development, education, plurality and citizenship. Simply put, a socially engaged and intellectually diverse type of Islamic studies would serve best for our graduates to be an integral and functioning component of our community and nation building.

The type of Islamic studies strongly needed does not simply capture the varieties of Islamic studies available for prospective students, but most importantly, its direct ramifications on the types of asatizah Singapore Muslims want to serve the community. This warrants our attention to the kind of training and mode of thinking adopted by the graduates or asatizah which have a direct impact on the religious life and social dynamics within the community. It is not too far-fetched to see the correlation between the types of Islamic studies and the outlook of asatizah who helm the community's leadership. In the past when most asatizah and ulama within the ranks were Al-Azhar University graduates, the kind of Sunni orthodoxy that predominate Singapore Muslims' religious life and teachings was noticeable. Its fairly accommodationist attitude and even occasional reformist stance, especially on matters pertaining to socio-cultural issues, were not uncommon. These contrast with religious discourse in the community today with Salafi-Wahhabi-inclined asatizah or *dai'* taking up a stricter posture that emphasizes scriptural conformity, while outrightly dismissing those accretions in the local religious traditions.

Moreover, while the old guard of the Al-Azhar University graduates or ulama had affinity to writing and publishing, especially in the Malay medium, be it in the forms of religious tracts, literary pieces and translation, this kind of intellectual affinity is very much lacking amongst the newer generation of asatizah cohort who are more digital savvy, communicatively suave, but demonstrate less interest in scholarship and research. A cursory survey of the publication endeavour would suggest very little output especially when we compare to the earlier cohorts of ulamas, as well as their peers in the region. As we often hear the rhetoric of the ulama as "*pewaris nabi*" (heir of the Prophet) or that they are the guardian of the Islamic *turath* (corpus/tradition), this obviously assumes the mastery of the Islamic corpus of various branches of learning, and amongst others, mastery in *kitab kuning*, or the classical religious text that have evolved and circulated in the region for centuries. While not the only vocation to be fulfilled by the asatizah, it is surely

one important component that cannot be relegated. Though there is an increase in the number of basic and graduates within the ranks of the asatizah over the years, this does not match the discursive output from this group, be it in terms of the number of published journal articles and books.[1] Furthermore, while the Islamic education sector (both formal and informal) has expanded over time, we have yet to see intellectual leadership, at least in religious discourse, within this newer cohort of Islamic studies graduates. Most importantly, we should expect leading asatizah to take the lead in initiating reform in Islamic discourse and studies. In cases where "reform" is made, it has been largely bureaucratic and technical.

It is imperative to deliberate the types of Islamic studies and its correlation to certain modes of thinking. It is more significant to discuss the effects of the traditionalist, reformist, revivalist and Salafi-Wahhabi variants, than to be solely preoccupied with ascertaining whether Islamic studies institutions and graduates are potential sources and sites for extremism. Such a discourse, generated in the anxiety of geopolitical and strategic policies, in policing the acts of terrorism and extremism, does not fully address issues of the need to scrutinize the content and affiliations of Islamic studies. Hence, it is not surprising if the community leadership, rather than seriously examining the need for reforming Islamic studies, has recurrently made the cliché call for the need for asatizah to contextualize their ideas and teachings.

Obviously this does not mean that contextualizing religious teachings is not important. However, the very content and intellectual affiliation in Islamic studies programmes needs to be first examined. Islamic studies graduates cannot be expected to easily adjust their religious ideas to adapt to contextual needs and challenges of Singapore after years of learning overseas, especially in the field of studies confined to a particular view or training. Urging for greater contextualization is certainly not uncalled for, but the overriding significance to critically revaluate the types of Islamic studies that our asatizah have been exposed to is highly warranted. Contextualization would mean nothing much if the

very training, exposure and intellectual affiliation of the graduates have not been fully understood and evaluated. Moreover, while we often take pride in sending students abroad for Islamic studies, we need to seriously ask if the curriculum that has been offered overseas for our students and their training has relevance to and priorities for our local/national needs.

Nurturing and building a viable Islamic education discourse in Singapore would not be possible unless ample attention is given to the issues and challenges that the asatizah are facing. A discerning planning is much needed to ensure the development of a type of Islamic studies education which is marked by vibrant scholarship that can contribute to knowledge for society and the larger humanity.

NOTE

1. By way of contrast, we see in Indonesia a robust publications of Islamic works. Many Middle Eastern-trained graduates, upon returning home, played important roles as writer and translator.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abdelhalim, Julten. 2017. "Reviving Islam: Neo-Salafism Traversing Saudi Arabia and Egypt". *Northeast African Studies* 17, no. 1: 51–76.

Abdul Rahman Basrun. 2011. "Kalam Insan: Sila Tipah ke depan, tapi usah abai peribadi Muslimah". *Berita Harian*, 3 October 2011.

Abu Bakar Ibrahim. 1998. "A History of Islamic Studies in Malaysia". *International Seminar on Islamic Studies in the ASEAN: History, Approaches and Future Trends.*

Adli Yashir Kuchit. 2020. "Pertingkat Gaji, Kemahiran Asatizah Antara Saranan Cofa". *Berita Harian*, 25 February 2020.

Ahmed, Eqbal. 1985. "Islam and Politics". In *Islam, Politics and the State: The Pakistan Experience*, edited by Mohammed Asghar Khan. London: Zed Books.

Alatas, Syed Hussein. 2015. *Biarkan Buta: Sekitar Perbahasan Ilmiah Derma Kornea Mata.* Selangor: DBP.

Al-Attas, Syed Muhammad Naquib. 1993. *Islam and Secularism.* Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC.

Azhar Ibrahim. 2006. "An Evaluation of Madrasah Education: Perspectives and Lessons from the Experiences of Some Muslim Societies". In *Secularism and Spirituality: Seeking Integrated Knowledge and Success in Madrasah Education in Singapore*, edited by Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman

and Lai Ah Eng, pp. 93–124. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish; Institute of Policy Studies.

———. 2014. *Contemporary Islamic Discourse in the Malay-Indonesian World: Critical Perspectives*. Selangor: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre.

BBC News. 2019. "Brunei says controversial Sharia law aimed at prevention", 12 April 2019. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-47906070 (accessed 4 December 2020).

Berita Harian. 1977. "Rombakan Yang Memang Perlu", 19 October 1977.

———. 1982. "Syor Tingkat Taraf Pendidikan Islamiah", 27 December 1982.

———. 2000. "Cerai Huraian Saling Menguntungkan", 2 May 2000.

———. 2017. "Asatizah Harus Jadi Duta Papar Ciri Sederhana Agama", 15 August 2017.

———. 2019a. "Bahas Belanjawan: Kementerian Pembangunan Negara; Perkukuh Sokongan Kepada Golongan Yang Memerlukan & Berisiko", 9 March 2019.

———. 2019b. "COFA: Asatizah dan karyawan main peranan bangun asatizah", 7 August 2019.

———. 2020a. "Mengiktiraf Peranan Penting Asatizah Kita", 1 March 2020.

———. 2020b. "Muis Teliti Sokongan Untuk Asatizah Tingkat Kemahiran", 6 June 2020.

———. 2020c. "Tiga tunjang bantu capai masyarakat Melayu gemilang: Masagos", 5 July 2020. https://www.beritaharian.sg/ge2020/tiga-tunjang-bantu-capai-masyarakat-melayu-gemilang-masagos (accessed 19 May 2021).

Berita Mediacorp. 2020. "Perlu ada model berdaya mampan bagi pertingat, sokong madrasah, kata AP Fahmi Aliman", 1 September 2020.

Berita Minggu. 2020. "Peranan Penting Asatizah dalam norma baru", 6 December 2020.

Chairul Fahmy Hussaini 2007. "Tiga Madrasah, Meterai MOU Jayakan Sistem Madrasah Bersama". *Berita Harian*, 30 October 2007.

Chee, Min Fui. 2006. "The Historical Evolution of Madrasah Education in Singapore". In *Secularism and Spirituality: Seeking Integrated Knowledge and Success in Madrasah Education in Singapore*, edited by Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman and Lai Ah Eng, pp. 6–28. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish; Institute of Policy Studies.

Chong, Terence, Lee Hock Guan, Norshahril Saat, and Serina Rahman. 2017. *The 2017 Johor Survey: Selected Findings*. Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.

Dhofier, Zamakhsyari. 1992. "The Intellectualization of Islamic Studies in Indonesia". *Indonesia Circle. School of Oriental & African Studies* 20, no. 58: 19–31.

El Fadl, Khaled Abou. 2007. *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists.* New York: HarperCollins.

Farah Mahamood, Aljunied and Ahmad Ali Zalman Putra. 2018. "Madrasah Education: A Journey towards Excellence". In *Fulfilling the Trust: 50 Years of Shaping Religious Life in Singapore*, edited by Norshahril Saat. Singapore: World Scientific Press, pp. 89–110.

Gesink, Indira Falk. 2009. *Islamic Reform and Conservatism.* London: IB Taurus.

Ghoshal, Baladas. 2016. "Arabisation of Islam in Asia: A Clash within Civilisation". *Straits Times*, 19 July 2016.

Hariz Baharuddin 2020a. "Skills Framework for Islamic Teachers". *Straits Times*, 25 February 2020.

———. 2020b. "Parliament: All Aspiring Islamic Religious Teachers to go through Practicum before being Accredited". *Straits Times*, 7 March 2020.

———. 2020c. "Parliament: 35% of Madrasah Students Pursue Tertiary Islamic-Related Education". *Berita Harian*, 14 October 2020. https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/politics/parliament-35-of-madrasah-students-pursue-tertiary-islamic-related-education.

Intan Azura Mokhtar. 2010. "Madrasahs in Singapore: Bridging between their Roles, Relevance and Resources". *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*: 111–25.

Irma Kamarudin. 2020. "Agih $200k Bagi Dana Membangun Asatizah". *Berita Harian*, 7 June 2020.

Khadijah Mohd Khambali and Nor Adina Abdul Kadir. 2005. "Pengaruh Al-Azhar Terhadap Sistem Pendidikan Islam di Tanah Melayu-Malaysia". *Jurnal Usuluddin*: 27–56.

Koh, Fabian. 2019. "Lessons from Religious Studies in Kuwait Should Be Contextualized to Singapore's Diverse Society: President Halimah". *Straits Times*, 5 November 2019.

Lee, Qing Ping. 2019. "Muis Sets up Postgraduate Programme for Islamic Scholars Returning from Overseas Studies". *Straits Times*, 25 July 2019.

Lily Zubaidah Rahim. 1998. *The Singapore Dilemma: The Political and Educational Marginality of the Malay Community.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Liyana Sulaiman. 2018. *Magical Orientation of Religion Among Malay/Muslims in Singapore: A Look at Modes of Healing Pertaining to Mental*

Illness. Singapore: Academic Exercise, Department of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore.

Luke, Allan. 2003. "Literacy Education for New Ethics of Global Community". *Language Arts* 81, no. 1: 20–22.

Mannheim, Karl. 1936. *Ideology and Utopia.* London: Routledge.

Mansor Sukaimi. 1982. *Koleksi Kertas Mendaki.* Singapore: Mendaki.

Mohamad Hasbi Hassan. 1992. "Melengkapkan ilmu karyawan, asatizah". *Berita Harian,* 21 May 1992.

Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman. 2012. "The Religio-Political Activism of Ulama in Singapore, Indonesia and the Malay World". *Indonesia and the Malay World* 40: 1–19.

Mohammad Hannan Hassan and Irwan Hadi Mohd Shuhaimy. 2018. "Developing Asatizah in Singapore through the Asatizah Recognition Scheme". In *Fulfilling the Trust: 50 Years of Shaping Muslim Religious Life in Singapore,* by Norshahril Saat. Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, pp. 73–87.

Mohammad Rizhan bin Leman. 2018. "Penafsiran Moden Terhadap Hukum Aurat Wanita: Satu Analisa". *Pergas* (blog), 1 December 2018. https://blog.Pergas.org.sg/wasat/penafsiran-moden-terhadap-hukum-aurat-wanita-satu-analisa/ (accessed 1 December 2020).

Mohd Faizal Musa. 2020. "Sunni-Shia Reconciliation in Malaysia". In *Alternative Voices in Muslim Southeast Asia: Discourse and Struggles,* edited by Norshahril Saat and Azhar Ibrahim. Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, pp. 156–82.

Mohd Maidin Packer. 2011. "Tidak Elok wanita pimpin masjid". *Berita Harian,* 1 October 2011.

Muhammad Haniff Hassan. 2011. "Islam tidak larang wanita jadi pengerusi masjid". *Berita Harian,* 8 October 2011.

Mukhlis Abu Bakar. 2006. "Between State Interests and Citizen Rights: Whither the Madrasah?" In *Secularism and Spirituality: Seeking Integrated Knowledge and Success in Madrasah Education in Singapore,* edited by Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman and Lai Ah Eng. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish; Institute of Policy Studies, pp. 29–57.

Muzaffar, Chandra. 1987. *Islamic Resurgence in Malaysia.* Petaling Jaya: Fajar Bakti Sdn Bhd.

Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman. 2006. "The Aims of Madrasah Education in Singapore: Problems and Perceptions". In *Secularism and Spirituality: Seeking Integrated Knowledge and Success in Madrasah Education in*

Singapore, edited by Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman and Lai Ah Eng. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish; Institute of Policy Studies, pp. 58–90.

———. 2018a. "Shariah Revivalism in Singapore". In *Islam in Southeast Asia: Negotiating Modernity*, edited by Norshahril Saat. Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, pp. 195–230.

———. 2018b. "Challenges to Madrasah Education in Contemporary Muslim Societies". In *Rethinking Madrasah Education in a Globalised World*, edited by Mukhlis Abu Bakar. London: Routledge, pp. 17–35.

———. 2019. "Muslim Personal Laws and the Accommodation of Minorities: The Need to Better Balance Individual Rights and Group Autonomy in Singapore". *German Law Journal* 20, no. 7: 1083–90.

Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman and Lai Ah Eng, eds. 2006. *Secularism and Spirituality: Seeking Integrated Knowledge and Success in Madrasah Education in Singapore*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish; Institute of Policy Studies.

Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman and Idris Rashid Khan Surattee. 2019. *Navigating Educational Development: Mendaki and the Malays*. Singapore: Straits Times Press.

Norshahril Saat. 2016. "National Day Rallies: Tracing the Developments of the Malay Community (1990–2015)". In *Majulah! 50 Years of Malay/Muslim Community in Singapore*, edited by Zainul Abidin Rasheed and Norshahril Saat. Singapore: World Scientific, pp. 69–76.

———. 2018. *Tradition and Islamic Learning: Singapore Students in the Al-Azhar University*. Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.

Norshahril Saat and Zait Nur Diyana. 2019. "Al-Azhar University and the Strengths of Informal Learning on Singapore Graduates". *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 2019/20, 2 April 2019.

Office of the Mufti. 2019. "Administration of Muslim Law Act (Chapter 3, Section 32)". https://www.muis.gov.sg/officeofthemufti/Fatwa/English-Joint-Tenancy (accessed 31 August 2020).

Pergas. 2004. *Moderation in Islam: In the Context of Muslim Community in Singapore*. Singapore: Pergas.

Pergas and LBKM. 2010. *Obor Ummah: Jejak Tokoh Agama Islam di Singapore*. Singapore: Pergas and LBKM.

Pohl, Florian. 2015. "On the Role of Interreligious Dialogue in Religious Studies Programs at Indonesian State Islamic Universities". *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 50, no. 1: 164–65.

Rekhi, Shefali. 2004. "Arabisation of Islam in S-E Asia a Danger". *Straits Times*, 30 October 2004.

Report of the Select Committee on the Administration of Muslim Law (Amendment). 1999. Bill no 18/98, Singapore.

Rijal, Syamsul. 2020. "Opposing Wahhabism: The Emergence of Ultra-Traditionalism in Contemporary Indonesia". In *The New Santri: Challenges to Traditional Religious Authority in Indonesia*, edited by Norshahril Saat and Ahmad Najib Burhani. Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, pp. 151–76.

Roy, Olivier. 2004. *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Sa'eda Buang. 2009. "The Evolution of Madrasah School System in Singapore: With Special Emphasis on its Curriculum Development". PhD thesis, National Technological University, Singapore.

Salma Semono. 2011. "Wanita penggerak utama masjid". *Berita Harian*, 8 October 2011.

Shaharuddin Maaruf. 1992. "Some Theoretical Problems Concerning Tradition and Modernization among the Malays of Southeast Asia". In *Asian Traditions and Modernization: Perspectives from Singapore*, by Yong Mun Cheong. Singapore: Times Academic Press, pp. 241–65.

———. 2005. "Religion and Utopian Thinking among Muslims of Southeast Asia". In *Local and Global: Social Transformation in Southeast Asia*, edited by Riaz Hassan. Leiden: Brill, pp. 315–30.

Shahida Sarhid. 2020. "Hidupkan budaya wakaf bagi perkasa asatizah: Masagos". *Berita Harian*, 2 December 2020.

Sharifah Mohamed. 2011. "Lebih Gemar Lelaki Terajui Masjid". *Berita Harian*, 8 October 2011.

Shihab, M. Quraish. 2006. *Sunnah-Syiah Bergandengan Tangan! Mungkinkah?* Ciputat: Lentera Hati.

Siti Aisyah Nordin. 2020. "Asatizah Berperanan penting bantu masyarakat harungi krisis: Josephine Teo". *Berita Harian*, 26 November 2020.

Straits Times. 2000. "Schooling for All 'Threatens Madrasahs': Schools Issue Concern for Islamic Group", 1 April 2000.

———. 2015. "Mahathir's Daughter Speaks Out against Arab Colonialism", 24 May 2015.

———. 2017a. "The Straits Times Says: Keeping Singapore Society Inclusive", 30 June 2017.

———. 2017b. "Anchoring Malay Culture in Singapore", 7 August 2017.

Suryana, A'an. 2020. *The State and Religious Violence in Indonesia: Minority Faiths and Vigilantism.* London; New York: Routledge.

Tan, Charlene. 2009. "The Reform Agenda for Madrasah Education". *Singapore, Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education* 3, no. 2: 67–80.

The Amman Message. 2004. "The Amman Message". https://ammanmessage.com/ (accessed 7 February 2020).

The Straits Budget, Singapore. 1939. 24 August 1939.

The Talking Dome. 2020. "Tanggungjawab seorang Isteri". Ep 25, Podcasts, 16 March 2020.

Today Singapore, 2018. "S'pore's First Islamic College Could Have Broad-based Curriculum to Equip Students with Employable Skills", 8 March 2018. https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/spores-first-islamic-college-could-have-broad-based-curriculum-equip-students-employable.

Wanto, Adri. 2010. "Indonesian Islam: What Went Right". *Straits Times*, 30 December 2010.

Zainah Anwar. 1987. *Islamic Revivalism in Malaysia: Dakwah Among the Students*. Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications.

INDEX

9/11 attack, 6, 8, 10, 116, 152, 182, 192

A
Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA), 165, 168, 181, 190n8
Ahmadiyah, 187
Alatas, Syed Hussein, 106, 202
Alattas, Syed Naquib, 188
Al-Azhar University, 44, 93, 95
  adapt to studying in, 85
  aim for, 46
  alternative Islamic institutions to, 52, 107
  challenges studying in, 47
  curriculum, 138
  dominant criterion of assessment, 49
    memorization of texts, 50, 54, 195
  education, 51
  explore universities other than, 46
  feedback from graduates, 45
  graduates. *See* Azharites
  halaqah culture in, 91
  how lessons are conducted in, 57
  limited social interactions of Singaporean students in, 94
  Islamic studies option other than, 23, 24
  Islamic studies programme in, 21
  memorandum with, 41, 112
  most popular destination for Singapore madrasah graduates, 38, 46, 83–85
  prepare students for, 100
  reputable institution for Islamic studies, 4, 17, 26, 195
  studying in, traditional centre of religious learning, 111
al-Banna, Hassan, 188
Al-Fath University, 69
Al-Madinah University, 58
al-Qaradawi, Yusuf, 106, 178, 188, 202
Al-Zuhri Institute, 75
Amin Abdullah, 197
Andalus, 200
anti-secular, 28
anti-western, 28

API. *See* Islamic Studies Academy
Arabic language, 23, 49, 66–67, 86, 134
Arabic medium religious studies qualifications, 113
Arab intellectuals, 145
Arabization, 101, 145–46, 153, 184, 201
asatizah, 126, 151–53, 157, 204, 205
  career progression, lack of, 114, 121, 122
  counselling skills, 130
  critical evaluation of, 154
  development, 149
  dominant discourse on, 4–8
  dominant religious discourse, promoted by, 151
  traditionalism, 155–60
  intellectual exposure and affiliation of, 193
  needs and development of, 191–92
  rukyah practioners, 174–76
  social media, using, 157–58
  upskilling training programmes, professionalize through, 37
Asatizah Executive Development Programme, 144
asatizah fraternity, 152
Asatizah Recognition Scheme (ARS), 14, 144
Ashmawi, Muhammad Sa'id, 106
Azharites, 27, 29
Azyumardi Azra, 197

B
Brunei, 4, 23, 46, 83, 111–12
  Sultan Sharif Ali Islamic University (UNISSA), 184

C
Cairo
  security concerns in, 99
Center for Advanced Studies on Islam, Science, and Civilisation (CASIS), 75, 76, 188
Committee on Future Asatizah (COFA), 146–50, 189, 193
compulsory education (CE), 6, 9, 15, 115, 129, 141, 142
Continuous Professional Education (CPE), 144
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)
  Article 16, 167
Counter Legal Draft in Indonesia, 166
COVID-19, 73, 104, 105, 157, 199

D
dars, 50, 91, 138
dual educational pathway, 123, 125, 129

E
educational socialization
  in Islamic institutions, 153

F
Facebook postings, 10, 16, 74
fatwa, 160–68, 194
Fatwa Committee, 161, 163, 164
female graduates, 16, 39, 41, 73, 171, 175
  challenges faced by, 46
  sermons, rarely conduct, 74
female undergraduates, 96, 97, 99, 102–4

fiqh, 22, 27, 56, 88, 158, 160, 181, 196
  minority, 177, 178
focus group discussions (FGDs), 15–17
funding, 58, 68, 140
  availability, 133
  opportunities, 107
  by Saudi Arabia, 24, 58
  support, 142, 198

G
gender equality, 29, 196
Goh Chok Tong
  National Day Rally speech in 1999, 10
graduates
  career opportunities for, 70
  career options for, 70
  counselling and social work, areas to consider for, 74
  educational training for, 140
  employability of, 74
  employment prospects, 13, 82, 99, 117, 130
  face-to-face interviews with, 71
  in gig economy, 72
  madrasah career guidance for, 71
  male and female, 73, 74
  in non-religious fields, 71
  from part-time courses in Singapore, 75–77
  post-graduate training for, 75
  public perceptions of, 70
  religious authorities, 74
  religious teachers, 71
  skillsets expected of, 74
  structural barriers for, 73
  undergraduates (*see* undergraduates)

H
Hadhramaut, Muslims in, 163
hadith, 4, 28, 30, 87, 111, 196
haj, 61, 100, 114
halal consumer businesses, 114
halaqahs, 50, 93, 104, 138
Halimah Yacob, 37, 174
Hamad Bin Khalifa University, 68
Hanbali school, 30, 87, 105, 196
Hanafi school, 30, 105
Hanafi, Hassan, 106
Haron Din, 175
hudud laws, 183–87, 194, 196, 197, 202

I
IAIN. *See* State Institute of Islamic Learning
Ibadi, 57
Ibn Khaldun University, 75
Imamiyah, 105
Indonesian Islam, 67
Indonesian Islamic studies, 33
Indonesian Islamic universities, 200
Indonesian State Islamic Universities (UIN), 21, 32, 76, 197
influential religious groups, 10
informal learning, 50–52, 56, 91–93, 104, 107, 139, 197, 198
inheritance, Islamic law of, 162, 163, 166
Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 63
inter-ethnic relations, 11, 117
Internal Security Act, 11
International Baccalaureate (IB), 142
International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT), 21

International Islamic College of Selangor (KUIS), 90
International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM), 38, 45, 62, 85, 195, 200
Inter-Religious Organization, 180
inter-religious relations, 11
Iran, 4, 46, 68, 69
Islam, 159
  as *ad-deen*, 177–78
  dominant religious discourse on, 151
Islamic banking and finance, 2, 84, 86, 111, 144, 179
Islamic development, 29
Islamic education, 42, 44, 126, 192
  advisory board, 127
  and discourse, 34, 206
  landscape, 17
  for Malay students in English stream schools, 122
  quality of, 68
  sector, 205
  Singaporean students pursuing, 135
  types of, 36
Islamic education discourse, nurturing and building, 206
Islamic environment, 42, 44
Islamic institutions, 17, 52, 153
  dominant religious orientations, 13
Islamic intellectual approach, 21
Islamic jurisprudence, 45, 83, 86
Islamic knowledge, 77, 94
  traditional branches, study of, 160
Islamic learning, 31, 49
  in Jordan, 52–58
Islamic Party of Malaysia, 79n5, 185–86
Islamic perspective, 9, 94, 124, 125
Islamic radicalism, 98
Islamic Religious Council of Singapore, 2. *See also* Muis
Islamic religious education, 5, 116
Islamic religious sciences, 33
Islamic revivalism. *See* religious revivalism
Islamic Science University of Malaysia (USIM), 38, 65, 89
Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), 11
Islamic studies, 22, 113
  discursive, intellectually eclectic and reformistic, 32–34
  in Egypt, 46–52
  graduates, 70–75
    educational background, 40–41
  Indonesian Islamic universities, 66–67
  Malaysia and Islamization of knowledge discourse, 61–66
  mode of thinking and impact on, 25–34
  options, 23–24
  programmes, 20–22, 34, 53
    colonial-orientalist tradition, 20
  Salafi orientation in, 30–31
  Saudi Arabia and Salafi-Wahhabi orientation, 58–61
  theology and jurisprudence, 86
  types of, 204
Islamic Studies Academy (API), 62
Islamic studies education, 110
  dominant nature of, 152
  religious teachings, 154

Islamic studies graduates
higher religious education, attaining, 3
non-degree issuing traditional institutions, 3
organizations and overseas Islamic educational institutions, 4
religious revivalism, rise of, 3
Islamic studies training, 202–6
Islamic systems, 9, 29, 124, 194, 197
Islamic universities, 16, 21, 24, 90, 105, 113
Islamic University of Madinah (IUM), 38, 59, 87
Islam in Context (ICON), 147
Islamization of knowledge, 94, 124, 185, 195, 201, 202
Ismail Menk, 73, 106
Istanbul University, 38
Ittihad Mahasiswa Singapura Al Mamlakah Al Arabia As Saudia (IMAM), 96

J
Ja'fari, 105
Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), 8, 152
Joint Madrasah System (JMS), 15, 40–41, 142
joint tenancy, fatwa, 161, 163
Jordan universities, 53–55, 58, 83, 84, 86
madrasahs collaborate with, 112
programmes, 57
religious studies in, 138
Junior College, 43, 89

K
Kesatuan Melayu Singapura (KMS), 119
Khan, Nouman Ali, 106
Knowledge-Based Economy (KBE), vi, 6, 10
KUIS. *See* International Islamic College of Selangor
KUSZA. *See* UniSZA

L
LBKM. *See* Prophet Muhammad's Birthday Memorial Scholarship
Lee Hsien Loong
National Day Rally Speech in 2019, 7
lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT), 10
"liberal" Islam, 10, 67

M
Madjid, Nurcholish, 33, 67, 106, 197, 202
Madrasah Al-Arabiah Al-Islamiah, 15, 40
Madrasah Al-Irsyad Al-Islamiah, 15, 40
Madrasah Aljunied Al-Islamiah, 15, 39, 40
Madrasah Al-Maarif Al-Islamiah, 19n1
Madrasah Alsagoff Al-Arabiah, 15, 19n1, 39
Madrasah Wak Tanjong Al-Islamiah, 15, 19n1, 39
madrasah education, 43, 126, 127, 136
madrasah students, 24
academic counselling, lack of, 99, 198, 201
Majlis Pelajaran Melayu (MEC), 120

Malay/Muslim community, 8, 9, 22, 37, 58
elites, 119
leaders, vi, 125
Malay-Muslim Organizations (MMOs), 99, 114, 200
Malaysian Islamic universities, 65, 89, 93, 107, 132
financial support from, 101
Maliki school, 26, 30, 105
Masagos Zulkifli, 7, 45, 128
maulid, 31, 59, 179
mazhab, 30, 57
Medina, 88
third most popular destination for Singapore students, 87
memorandums of understanding (MOUs)
between madrasahs and partner universities, 112, 133
Middle East, 53, 55, 64, 98, 133, 200
contemporary scholars, 198
current Singapore students in, 87
do not interact with students from, 50
graduates, 76
imported religious teachers from, 119
Islamic centres of learning, 118
keep track of students' activities in, 101
madrasah education in, 12
Muslim Brotherhood ideologues in, 178
perceptions of religious education in, 38
preachers from, 106
pursue tertiary religious education in, 4
reluctance to send daughters to, 89
returning students from, vii
revivalist mode of thought from, 184
Singapore's religious studies graduates in, 13
studying in, 24, 41, 146
undergraduates in, 83
universities, 48, 58, 66, 101, 107, 116, 134, 201, 202
Ministry of Home Affairs, 19n4
Moeslim Abdurahman, 197
Mohamad Hasbi Hassan, 131
Mohamad Maliki Osman, 6, 82, 147
mufti, 52, 72, 127, 174, 186
Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab, 196
Muhammadiyah, 2, 114, 200
Muhammadiyah Islamic College, 112
Muhammad Kamal Hassan, 188
Muhammad Nur Manuty, 188
Muhammad (Prophet), 4, 30, 179
Muis, 11, 130, 161, 162
Code of Ethics course, 57
Muslim Brotherhood, 178
Muslim minority, 21, 71
Muslim personal law, 160–68
Muslim scholars, 5, 31, 33, 178, 182
Muslim societies, 24, 28, 31, 62, 124, 172
and organizations, 22, 39
Muslim thought, 32
Muslim *ummah*, 29
Muslim women, 10, 170
Muslim Youth Forum (MYF), 157
Muzaffar, Chandra, 106, 202

N
Naik, Zakir, 11, 73, 106
Nanyang Technological University (NTU), 41, 134
naqli, 65
National University of Malaysia (UKM), 38, 62, 90
National University of Singapore (NUS), 41, 75, 78
non-governmental organizations (NGOs), 2, 46, 95, 117, 157

O
Osman Jantan, 157

P
PAS. *See* Islamic Party of Malaysia
People's Action Party (PAP), 120, 126
Perdaus, 2
Pergas, 71, 102, 144, 178, 180–84, 200
  arrangements with Malaysian institutions, 78, 112
  employment opportunities in, 114
  Joint Committee of Madrasah Education, part of, 127
  publications by, 170, 172, 189
  twining programmes with, 188
Perkemas, 49, 56, 109n4
pesantren, 33, 66, 67
pondok, 66
political motif, 180–82
polygamy, 166
Postgraduate Certificate in Islam in Contemporary Societies (PCICS), 82, 147, 148, 199
Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE), 43, 142
Prophet Muhammad's Birthday Memorial Scholarship (LBKM), 99, 114
public sector, 45, 117

Q
Al-Qaradawi, Yusuf, 69, 73, 106, 172, 177, 202
  religious views of, 178
  works of, 189
Quran, 11, 23, 30, 51, 94, 183, 196
  classes, 117
  deviating from, 172
  exegesis of, 23, 172
  interpret verses of, 172
  reciting, 74, 117
  studies, 87, 90–92, 136
  teaching of, 92, 179
Qutb, Sayyid, 202

R
radicalism
  rise of, 8, 37, 82, 143
  threat of, 147
Ramadhan, 74
Registrar of Muslim Marriages (ROMM), 45, 113
religious discourse, 9, 13, 31, 69, 151, 156
  and activism, 177
  asatizah, promoted by, 16, 18
  critical examination of, 154
  in Malaysia, 185
  on social media, 105
religious education, 4–7, 111, 116, 127, 128, 194
  administration and curriculum, 118
  and asatizah development, 121
  and career guidance, 132–35

critical revaluation of, 190
dogmatism, 137
English schools, 118
fatwa and Muslim personal law, 160–68
free secondary and university education, 120
higher education, 126
implications on planning for, 129–32
in Islamic universities, 137
in madrasah, 126
Malay-based education, 120
motivation for pursuing, 42–45
nature of, 17, 203
problems in, 37
reforms, 5
Re-Orientation Plan, 120
"secular" subjects, 121, 122
studies on, 12–13
traditionalism, 155–60
and training, 149
training of religious teachers, 135–42
women and gender relations, 168–74
Religious Education Department (RED), 126, 127
religious institutions, 17, 136
religious knowledge, 136
religious learning, 69, 111, 145
religious orientations, 13, 17, 18, 36, 145
religious practices, 31, 179–80
Religious Rehabilitation Group, 11
religious resurgence
emergence of, 195
and Islamization of knowledge, 28–30
religious revivalism, 9, 12, 192
group preservation, 182–84
impact of, 123–26
Islam as *ad-deen*, 177–78
Muslim, 10, 123, 152
political motif, 180–82
region, influence from, 184–90
religious practices and beliefs, 179–80
secularism, 178–79
religious rituals, 125
religious rulings, 34, 177
religious schools, 89, 127
religious sciences, 131, 136
and theology, 44
religious sector, 13, 78
religious studies, 24, 134, 146, 149
confessional approach to, 131
demand for enrolment, 128
graduates, 110
higher education in, 125
lower middle-class families, 84
socio-economic background, 84
undergraduates, 111
religious teachers, 115, 129
development of, 127
employment of, 116
training of, 135–42
religious teaching, 4, 11, 37, 139, 149
contextualization, 144, 154, 205–6
and learning, 36
religious thought, 2, 91
religious traditionalism, 26–28, 31, 155, 177, 194
religious violence and exclusivism, 32

S

Salafi orientation, 30–31
Salafism, 56

Salafi-Wahhabism, 50, 60, 88, 196
Saudi Arabia, 4, 15, 39, 45, 50, 91, 93, 95, 100, 196, 197, 200
  modern universities, rise of, 21
  more students studying in, 17
  opportunity for part-time work, 61
  remain ideal destination, 23
  Salafi-Wahhabism, 58, 60, 145
  scholarship and funding, 24, 58, 112
  shift of interest, 24
  universities in, do not require religious studies background, 112
secularism, 178–79, 197
  influence of, 43
  rejection of, 201
  threat of, 124
Shafie, 30, 56, 59, 87, 165, 188
Shaikh Muhammad Abduh, 26, 138
Sharia Court, 2, 45, 71, 113, 181
Sharia laws, 4, 15, 58, 185, 186
Shia Muslims, 57, 69
Shihab, Quraish, 33, 48, 51, 172, 197, 202
Shiism, 56–57, 87, 187
Sidek Saniff, 126
Singapore, 184
  Islamic studies training needed in, 202–6
  Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) sympathizers, 8
  madrasah graduates, 24
  multi-racial society, 7
  Muslims in, 10, 24, 28, 57, 143, 153
  Muslim community, 1, 12
  national curriculum, 6, 113, 129, 140–42
  traditionalism, 155–60
Singapore Islamic College, 153
Singapore Muslim Identity Project, 11
Singapore Students' Association in Jordan (SIRAJ), 95
Siradj, Aqil, 33, 197
social media, 104, 157–58, 174, 194
  in developing knowledge on Islam, 15
  global preachers on, 106
  religious discourse on, 105
  teaching and writings in, 16
Sonhadji, Ahmad, 157
State Institute of Islamic Learning (IAIN), 32
Student Career and Welfare Office (SCWO), 135
Student Liaison Officer (SLO), 61, 100
Sufism, 56
Sultan Sharif Ali Islamic University (UNISSA), 184
Sultan Zainal Abidin Islamic College. *See* UniSZA
Sunnah, 94, 177, 179
Sunni *mazhab*, 30, 57
Syafii Maarif, 33, 67, 106, 197
Syed Abdillah Jufri, 157

T

Tablighi Jamaat, 59
teaching religion, 1, 3, 119, 139, 140
  job opportunities, apart from, 129, 132
  no sole monopoly in, 203
  strategies in, 116
Technology University of Malaysia (UTM), 90

U
UIN. *See* Indonesian State Islamic Universities
UKM. *See* National University of Malaysia
ulama, 2, 24–26, 50, 84, 119, 170
ummah, 8, 30, 188
undergraduates
  career opportunities, 101–4
  religious education, 81
  social service sector, aim to enter, 131
  support rendered and challenges faced by, 98–101
  teaching and learning, modes of, 91–94
UniSZA, 47
United Malays National Organization (UMNO), 185, 186
University of Jordan (UJ), 38, 85
  online examinations system, 92
University of Malaya (UM), 38, 62, 90
USIM. *See* Islamic Science University of Malaysia
ustaz, 1, 66–67, 77, 176
ustazah, 1, 77, 103–4
usuluddin, 22, 27, 83, 160
UTM. *See* Technology University of Malaysia

W
Wahid, Abdurrahman, 106, 202
Wan Daud, Wan Mohd Nor, 188
World Islamic Sciences and Education University (WISE), 86

Y
Yarmouk University (YU), 38, 53, 86
Yusuf, Hamza, 73

Z
Zaidi, 105
Zarqa University (ZU), 86

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Norshahril Saat is Senior Fellow at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore. He received his PhD in International, Political and Strategic Studies from the Australian National University (ANU).

Azhar Ibrahim is Lecturer at the Department of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore (NUS). He obtained his PhD from the same department.

Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman is Associate Professor at the Department of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore (NUS). She obtained her PhD from the same department.

ISEAS
YUSOF ISHAK
INSTITUTE

Islamic religious teachers (*asatizah*) and scholars (*ulama*) play a significant role in providing spiritual leadership for the Singapore Malay/Muslim community. Lately, the group has been cast under the spotlight over a range of issues, from underperformance in the national examination, their ability to integrate into the broader society, exposure to radical and conservative ideas such as Salafism from the Middle East, and unemployment. *Reaching for the Crescent* examines a growing segment within the group, namely Islamic studies graduates, who obtained their degrees from universities in the Middle East and neighbouring Malaysia and Indonesia. It identifies factors that condition the proliferation of Islamic studies graduates in Singapore, examine the dominant religious institutions they attend, the nature of Islamic education they received, and their challenges. It tackles the impact of their religious education on the spiritual life and well-being of the community. Based on qualitative and quantitative data collected, the book calls for a rethinking of a prevailing discourse of Arabization of Singapore Muslims and academic approaches that focus on madrasah education and Islam through the security lens.

ISEAS
PUBLISHING

30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Singapore 119614
http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg

SINGAPORE
Social Issues

BM607h

ISBN 978-981-4951-37-1
9 789814 951371